FLASH
THE LEAD DOG

George Marsh

CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL.

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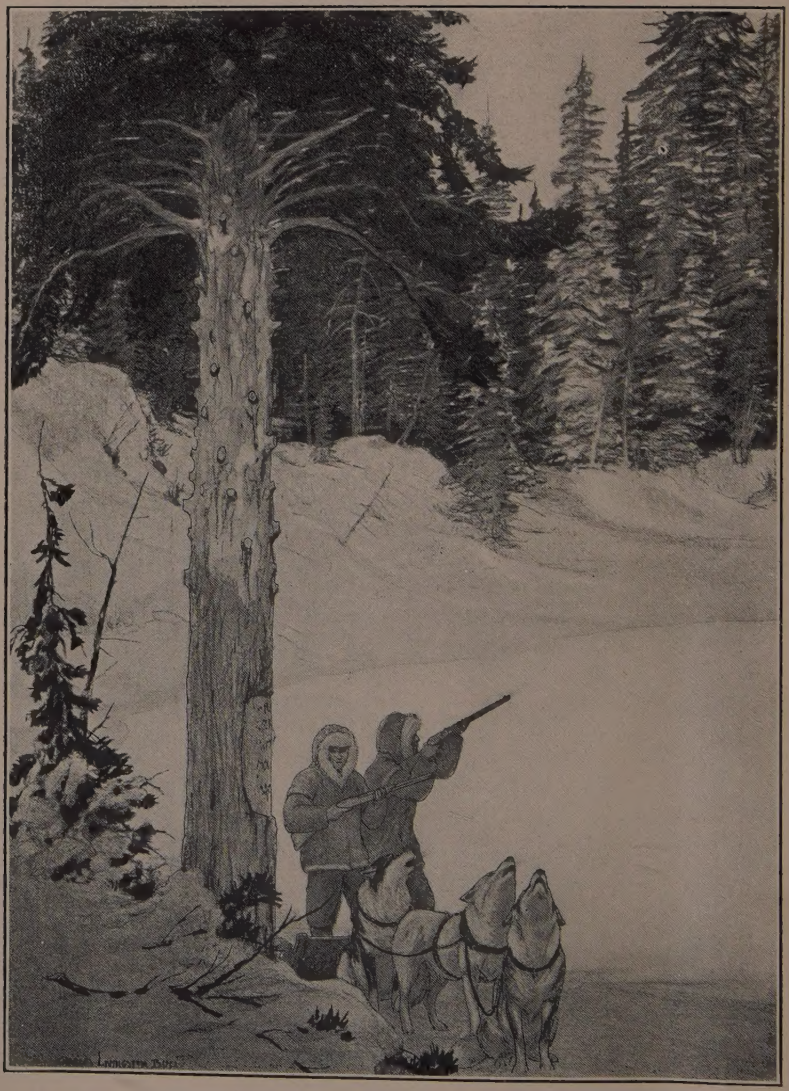

GASPARD AND BROCK FIRED THE SALUTE TO THE DEAD

FLASH
THE LEAD DOG

By
GEORGE MARSH

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Flash, The Lead Dog

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Flash The Lead Dog

CHAPTER I

WHAT THE GOOSE HUNTERS SAW

"WHAT's that, Gaspard, off shore there?"

The black eyes of Gaspard Lecroix shifted from the incoming flock of snowy geese out to the grey water of James Bay, beyond the marshes where the boys lay in a "hide."

"Schooner, I t'ink," muttered the half-breed, watching the distant object for a space through eyes narrowed to slits.

"What in thunder's a schooner doing on this coast in September?" demanded Brock McCain.

"Strange t'ing for sure!" replied the older of the two goose hunters, his black brows knotted in perplexity.

"The only schooner that I know of north of us, is warped up on the shore at Fort Severn, and that's four hundred miles," insisted Brock. "This is a stranger; something queer here!"

"Ah-hah! Eet ees queer."

"Must be free traders! They can't get through Hudson's Straits now; they've got to winter on the bay. I wish my father knew about this," regretted the white boy, "but it's too late to turn back now."

"Eef we going to trap de Yellow-Leg headwater dis long snow we got no tam to lose."

"Right you are, old partner! But I'd like to know what these people are doing on this coast. You don't suppose we'll run into them on the Yellow-Leg?"

The swart face of Gaspard Lecroix went darker. The small eyes glittered as he said: "My fader die on de Yellow-Leg! If dese peopl' hunt dat countree, last spreeng, dey —"

"But that was two hundred miles inland, Gaspard," objected Brock. "These people would not leave the coast."

"Ah-hah, mebbe not," sighed the half-breed, saddened by the thought of the father he had lost.

Since daylight, grey, blue and snowy geese had patrolled the wide marshes which rim the west coast of the salt bay of the north. Since daylight, restless flocks of teal and golden-eye, pin-tail and black duck had swarmed along the lip of the retreating tide. For it was hunting weather when the lead-hued cloud banks hang low over the smoky bay and the rain in the wind stirs the water fowl to constant activity.

Over the marsh which reached from the black spruce guarding the muskeg, inland, to the wet flats where myriad shore birds fed behind the ebbing tide, the flock of "snowies" which the boys were watching, drifted lazily in from the sea. Approaching the "hide" of alders, they bunched, then wavered, as the call of the white goose reached them from the grass flats. Again the "goup-goup" of their kind drifted to their curious ears. They dipped swiftly, and, at a distance of twenty yards, for an instant hovered above the alders, searching for their calling brothers.

Then, in quick succession two shots roared beneath them and before the beating pinions of the bewildered geese lifted and swept them out of range, again two guns exploded in the "hide."

Falling vertically, two birds struck the grass flats stone dead; two angled down from the retreating "snowies," wings moving mechanically, to hit the marsh with a thud a hundred yards from the alders.

"Four more," said Brock, rising to stretch his stiff legs. "That makes twenty this morning, Gaspard."

"We eat all we can carry. I wish we had biggair boat." The lean features of Lecroix shaped a faint smile. He was tall and rangily built, with the straight black hair which marked the strain of the Indian, and small, deep-set eyes.

"Oh, we'll find caribou on the Yellow-Leg, and if we make the lakes in time, we'll net plenty of white-fish and trout. I don't see why you worry about grub," demurred Brock, wide shouldered and stocky, with frank blue eyes and a freckled face, topped by russet hair.

Gaspard shook his head good-naturedly at the optimism of his friend. "De caribou ees here to-day; to-morrow gone. We must get feesh or we have hard tam to feed de dog in de winter," he replied. "We got wan month to de freeze-up, Brock. We must hurry." And he went to pick up the white geese with their pink bills and feet and black tipped wings, which his calling had lured to their doom.

Then, each with a back load of birds suspended by a leather tump-line passing over the head, the boys started for their camp a mile across the marsh, where a tongue of higher land thickly grown with willow and alder thrust out into the tide flats.

At the camp, a chorus of husky yelps hailed them.

"Hello, Flash, old pup!" called Brock, tossing his geese to the platform cache high above the reach of the dogs. As his master went to the stake where he was tied, the big Eskimo puppy wriggled in ecstacy, alternately growling and yelping his delight.

"You'd like those geese, you glutton, wouldn't you?" chuckled Brock as the dog reared, beating the boy's chest with hairy paws. With a hug, the master buried his face in the thick ruff of slate-grey to escape the assaults of a red tongue. "This pup's growing so fast he could eat a caribou every meal, couldn't he?" And seizing the jowls of the great puppy who laughed a red laugh in his face, Brock rolled the grinning head from side to side, as the slant eyes looked their love.

At neighboring stakes three grown dogs fretted and yelped, jealously demanding recognition. Brock left his puppy, and with a pat on the head and pull at the ears, spoke to each.

"Well Kona, old girl!" he said to a snow-white

female who greeted him no less eagerly than the slate-grey and white Flash. "You've dug a hole deep enough to bury yourself in. Hello Slit-Ear, you rascal!" he cried to a black and white dog with an ear which had been ripped by the razor-like claws of a lynx. The fourth, a hulking yellow and white husky, the red lower lids of whose oblique, amber colored eyes marked a near strain of the wolf, crouched at his stake. Nose wrinkled, baring huge white tusks, curved tail switching, the deep throat of the dog rumbled as Brock went to him.

"Yellow-Eye! You've been chewing at that wire again!" And the youth seized the gaping lower jaw of the dog and looked into the tawny eyes raised to his. "You're king-dog of this team, now, old boy, but some day that pup Flash'll make your old bones crack."

"We salt dese geese and start up de coast before de wind holds us up," announced Gaspard, with an anxious look at the north-east where ominous cloud banks met the lead-hued bay.

"All right. You start on the geese while I rustle a fire and some grub." Shortly Brock had a kettle of goose on a quick fire of drift cedar, then went to a small stream which entered the flats near the camp to help Gaspard pluck, singe and clean the

geese shot that morning. By the time they had finished their dinner of boiled goose, corn bread and wild cranberries, the returning tide had backed up the water in the stream to a depth sufficient to float the loaded canoe out through the channel. Then with their freight of geese, flour and provisions; traps and camp outfit, on top of which was lashed a toboggan sled, they started for the mouth of the unknown and mysterious Yellow-Leg, forty miles up the coast. Following along shore, tails up, and in full cry, as they revelled in their freedom after days of tethered idleness, the dogs drove frightened flocks of shore-birds, duck and geese into the air, as they travelled.

"You're a big, able lad, Brock, for your age," Angus McCain, factor of Hungry House, on the Starving River, had replied in July to the pleading of his son to be allowed to winter on the Yellow-Leg with Gaspard; "but you're too young to trap strange country."

"But you admit that Gaspard is a first rate canoe man and dog-driver," Brock had urged.

"Yes, Gaspard was taught by the ablest hunter I've ever known, his father, and even he came to grief. You couldn't drive a Starving River Indian into that country now."

Somewhere far to the north, in the unexplored

lake country of the interior, from which flowed the great Winisk and the Carcajou, the Yellow-Leg was thought to have its sources. But no Indian trading at Hungry House had ever ascended the river, from the bay, and of the hunters who wintered in the Starving River country but one had the hardihood to cross the divide and enter the unknown and, therefore, mysterious land to the north — and he had not returned. That man was Pierre Lecroix, father of Gaspard.

With his dog-team he had started on the March crust to explore the nameless valleys beyond the last blue hills for signs of fur; and until the trails went soft in the April thaws, Gaspard and his brother had followed his father's trap-lines, confident of his safe return. But when the days of sled travel had passed, they knew that somewhere beyond the grim hills to the north, tragedy had overtaken the best bushman and hunter on the Starving — that a fate, unimagined, mysterious, had stricken the veteran who would not starve where caribou roamed the muskegs.

"But Pierre was alone," objected Brock. "That was the trouble, I believe. He got sick or hurt, and couldn't hunt. Queer, though, that none of his dogs came back."

"Wolves finished them, likely. But don't forget,

lad, that one winter, twenty years ago, the rabbit plague and the disappearance of the caribou gave this river its name. Many of the Crees starved out, so the Company men sent to build this post the next summer called it Hungry House."

"There are plenty of caribou now, father, and last winter Gaspard saw moose on the Smoking Lakes," countered Brock.

"It's not Gaspard your mother and I are in doubt about, son. He's nineteen, two years older than you, and was raised in the bush. You might get caught in a norther — alone, on your trap-lines —"

"And get lost, you think?" broke in Brock, the blood showing in his brown face, as his frank eyes met his father's doubtful look.

"Yes, and get lost — snowed up in a big blow, far from your camp, without grub," answered Angus McCain, dryly. "Many a good man, older, stronger and wiser than you, my lad, has starved out after a big snow — lost."

For a space Brock frowned down at his moccasins, then his pride spurred him to answer. "Of course, I've got plenty to learn from Gaspard. He's part Cree and it's uncanny all he knows about the bush; but I'm stouter and heavier than he is, if I am younger."

The factor had smiled a bit proudly at the wide

shoulders and big bones of his hulking son as he said with undisguised amusement: "You're strong as a moose, Brock. It's bush-craft, experience, that you lack. But don't crow over Gaspard because of your weight. He's got the Cree build of his mother — all wire and toughness. He'd keep himself alive where you'd starve, you're growing so fast."

"Oh, I admit all that," said the persistent boy. "He'd be boss on this trip, and we're like brothers. It's time, too, I made something for myself, father."

Slowly the grey eyes of the elder McCain softened as his son begged for the chance to risk his life in the hinterlands of the Yellow-Leg. At last he said, reluctantly: "If you'll promise to take the dogs and make for the coast and home when your grub gets low instead of trying to stick it out, I'll consent."

"Good old dad!" Brock impulsively wrung his father's hand.

But it was late in the season and an outfit for the winter hunt on the Yellow-Leg was still to be assembled. First they needed a dog-team. Gaspard had none. His father's dogs had never returned. Brock owned two, Flash, the Ungava puppy he had bought in the spring from a Twin

Island Esquimo who was travelling to Fort Albany on the Company supply boat; and Kona whose Cree name described her color, snow-white. Slit-Ear and Yellow-Eye were loaned him by his father. For their Peterboro canoe they travelled forty miles down the coast to Elkwan, as Hungry House had none to spare. So early September found them at last on their way to the wilderness of the Yellow-Leg.

CHAPTER II

AT THE TURN OF THE TIDE

THROUGH the early afternoon the deeply loaded canoe followed the flat coast. From the stern, Gaspard, the better canoeman, driving his narrow blade with the straight-armed lunge of the Cree, watched with frowning eyes the increasing blackness of the northern horizon. Brock, as his big-muscled back and arms made the water foam behind his paddle, followed with his eyes the galloping dogs in their mad pursuit of duck and shore-birds along the beaches.

The sun was hanging over the muskeg behind the

spruce beyond the marshes when Gaspard glanced into the north and shook his head.

"We better find camp ground before de tide leave us," he warned. "We run up some creek."

"You're right," Brock replied. "We can't run the chance of getting the flour wet. But I don't see any creek mouth or sand-spit ahead, do you?"

"No, dis is a bad piece of shore to camp on wid a heavy load."

For an hour the paddles of the canoemen churned the grey bay water as they reconnoitered the flats ahead for a hospitable creek mouth into which they could run for shelter from the blow which threatened them at the turn of the tide. But no creek channel through the marshes, or boulder-strewn sand-spit, lifting above high tide, met their anxious eyes.

To follow the wind-driven flood in over the mud-flats in the heavily loaded canoe might mean grounding and the loss of their precious flour; to turn seaward and head the deep riding boat into the wind was unthinkable. In a strong sea, she would drive her nose under and fill.

As the muskeg smothered the sun, Gaspard stood in the stern, searching the beaches to the north. Somewhere ahead a friendly little river must cross the marshes to the sea, or a hospitable sand-spit thrust out to meet the tide.

"Looks as if we had a night in the boat ahead of us," said Brock, as the stern-man sat down and silently took up his paddling again.

"If she blow hard when de tide come in, de boat will fill," was the gloomy comment of the other.

On they travelled, searching for a way in to a dry camp ground on the marshes, but in vain. Then, as the tide turned, the wind rose, and the bronzed faces of the canoemen set grim with the knowledge that the filling of their boat on the flats meant the abandonment of their winter on the Yellow-Leg. For without flour they dared not enter the unknown country.

Swiftly the light died on the west coast as the white horses of the driven flood raced in from the dusk-blanketed north. Kneeling in the bow, teeth clamped, the stubbornness of his Scotch ancestry battling all thought of failure, Brock drove his paddle with all the splendid power of his muscular arms and back. From the stern the sinewy Gaspard — taking them on the quarter — eased the nose of the able boat through the short seas. But loaded as they were, the stern-man realized that the rising wind would soon kick up a sea in which the heavily loaded canoe could not live. It was a matter of minutes. His decision was quickly made.

"Look out!" he cried, "we turn inshore!" And

burying his paddle, with the prompt aid of Brock he swung the bow.

He had chosen to run in through the low surf over the flats and risk the chance of grounding while the tide washed over the canoe.

Blindly they drove the boat in through the thickening dusk. As they shot into the white shoals they dropped paddles, seized their setting poles and pushed desperately on through the low-breaking, flood tide. Suddenly the canoe stopped with a jolt, throwing the polers forward to their knees. A following wave lifted and swung the stern inshore. The next would wash over the boat, grounded broadside on, filling her. The flour!

Leaping into the water, desperate with the fear of the loss of the precious cargo, with a great heave Brock eased the bow off the hummock beneath it, and with Gaspard pushing at the stern, headed the lightened boat in over the flats where she grounded beyond the break of the waves. The tarpaulin covering the flour bags was wet with spray.

"They're dry as a bone!" shouted Brock, reaching under the heavy canvas to the flour bags. "Whew! That was a close call!"

"Good t'ing de beach is flat here," cried Gaspard. "I tho't she fill for sure."

"The tide's not half full yet, is it?"

"No, we got to float de cano' in, as de tide rises. You look out for de boat and I go back to high ground and build a fire."

So, with the stern lashed to a pole to keep the boat from swinging, Brock curled up in the canoe to wait for the tide to float her, while Gaspard went inland with kettle and frying-pan, for the hours of toil since noon had left them desperately hungry.

It was not long before Brock saw a light flicker, back on the marsh. His empty stomach clamored for the tea and fried goose that Gaspard was cooking. Then for a space, his tired body conquered him and, defying the wind and the roar of the surf on the beach outside, he dozed, to be wakened by the swinging of the canoe, afloat, again, in the tide.

Tumbling out in his water-tight sealskin boots Brock guided the craft through the shallows until she again grounded, and, lashing the boat to a setting pole, he started for the fire where hot tea awaited him. As he crossed the marsh to the alder thicket which served as a partial wind-break for the fire, a chorus of yelps challenged his approach.

"The dogs have found Gaspard," he chuckled, and quickened his pace.

As he approached the higher ground of the alders, from the gloom ahead came a sharp yelp followed by a whine. A hairy body lunged into him. Great paws pounded his chest.

"Hello, Flash! You smelled me, didn't you?" And Brock's face felt the swift lick of a hot tongue. "Say, I'm half starved, cook!"cried the hungry youth as he fought off the caresses of the welcoming dogs. "How about a little bite?"

Gaspard smiled as he turned the sputtering goose in the pan with his skinning knife. "You lucky you not half drown'. We stay out dere little longer to-night and we bury de boat."

"You're right there, old boy. I thought, one time, we'd lost our winter on the Yellow-Leg."

"You stake de boat when you leave her?"

"You bet. But she's far in now where there's no wash. I'll go back when I've filled this hollow, and bring her in as the tide rises."

So dogs and men ate their supper by the little fire of drift wood while the wind rocked the alders above them. After midnight, when the tide had turned, they brought their tent and blankets in from the canoe and rolled up for needed rest after the hard day. Wrapped in his blanket on the spread tent, Brock was fast dozing into sleep when a moist nose touched his face. Then close against his back pushed and shoved the hairy bulk of a husky.

"What're y' crowdin' for, Flash?" mumbled Brock, smiling in his drowsiness. "Can't y' find

room enough on this marsh to lie down without lying on me?"

For answer, with a contented grunt the great puppy snuggled closer against the back of his master, and shortly they slept.

CHAPTER III

ON THE YELLOW-LEG TRAIL

By daylight, a kettle of goose was already bubbling over the fire, for the wind had cleared the weather and a long paddle up the coast lay before them. But the tide was out. A half mile of mud flat separated the canoe from the beach. Unloading and carrying the boat out to meet the incoming flood, they followed with the cargo, packed out on tump-lines. Again, with the dogs following the

shore, the canoe headed up the coast. They had travelled hardly a mile when Gaspard stood up and pointed inshore.

"We miss dat by onlee little piece!" he laughed in chagrin.

There, over the flats, where flocks of black duck lifted before the galloping huskies, the channel of a small river wound through the marsh. A few more minutes of light the night before would have led them to safety and saved the voyageurs the toil of launching the canoe over the flats.

"Good joke on us!" regretted Brock.

"To-night we camp at de Big Owl — to-morrow de Yellow-Leg," said Gaspard, settling into a vicious stroke.

"Right! To-morrow the Yellow-Leg!" And the paddles churned the grey bay water as the boat sped up the low coast.

Past boulder-strewn beaches, and sand-spits thrusting out into the shoals, where companies of grey geese dozed, each, according to their custom, guarded by a long necked sentinel; past white islands of snowy geese, called "wavies" throughout the north, who rose, shrilly protesting at the interruption of their sun bath, travelled the canoe. At intervals, the whiskered face of a seal bobbed up in the calm sea ahead, shortly to disappear. Late in

the afternoon, the lean face of Gaspard widened in a grin as he searched the coast to the north.

"Dere she is, de Big Owl," he announced with satisfaction. "We mak' good tam to-day, eh, Brock?"

Brock stood up to look. In the distance he made out where the break in the line of spruce edging the coast marked the mouth of the river.

As they approached the channel, Gaspard suddenly called, "Look at dem!"

Beyond the river mouth, like a long, black bar, a line of geese paralleled the coast. Then with much cackling and commotion, the nearest began to rise. The black brant had come!

"Why there must be thousands in that flock!" cried Brock, as the grey wanderers from the Arctic islands took the air at the warnings of their leaders.

"Sign of early winter, w'en de brant come so soon;" said Gaspard, swinging the bow inshore. "We got no tam to lose."

The following noon the voyageurs reached the mouth of the Yellow-Leg, which, like all west coast rivers, debouches into the bay through a delta. The tide was out and over the uncovered flats of the low, delta islands, yellow-legs, curlew and plover fed, ignoring the moving canoe.

"The Yellow-Leg, at last!" cried Brock, standing in the canoe, hands shielding eyes.

"Big rivier!" replied Gaspard, "she got t'ree mouth."

"By golly, there's that schooner again!" Brock pointed into the north.

Gaspard's black eyes studied the dark object on the water, far up the coast. "W'at she hang off dis riviere for?" he muttered.

"They may be looking for winter quarters."

"Ah-hah."

"I'd sure like to run on up the coast and have a look at them," said Brock.

"No, we got big job ahead before de freeze-up, Brock." Then with a sweep of his paddle, Gaspard swung the bow inshore. "Here we go for de big hunt on de Yellow-Leg."

Shortly the canoe left the yellow bay water and was travelling in the mouth of the south channel through the clear drainage from spring-fed lakes of the interior.

"I'm fish-hungry," said Brock that afternoon as he got out the gill-net at their camp on the river shore above the islands of the delta. "Ought to get whitefish here!"

Anchoring one end of the long net to the shore, he lashed a heavy stone to the anchor line of the opposite end, and, paddling at right angles into the stream, sank the weight. The wooden floats

lifted the top of the net to the surface while the lead weights on the lower edge spread it, like a curtain, across the current. Fish following the shore near the surface would attempt to get through, and thus became entangled in the wall of three-inch meshes. Owing to their small, sucker-like mouths, the delicious whitefish can be taken only by nets.

As Brock set the net while Gaspard cooked supper, four fish-hungry dogs, tails waving in anticipation, watched with slavering mouths from the shore. At daylight Brock leaped into the canoe and, lifting the off-shore anchor, slowly worked the net into the boat.

"Hey, Gaspard!" he called to the man cooking breakfast. "She's full of whitefish!"

Snared in the dripping meshes silvery bodies flashed in the sun as Brock lifted them from the water. Then, as he reached the middle of the hundred foot net, a great rent drew an exclamation of surprise.

"Sturgeon are still running! One went through here like a cannon ball. Ought to get some at the first rapids!"

Then gathering his fish, he spread the net on the shore to dry until they started. That morning, contrary to the winter custom of feeding only at night, the dogs got their fill of succulent whitefish,

in the north more prized as food for man and dog than trout or salmon.

Day by day through the following week the canoe bound for the unmapped headwaters of the Yellow-Leg bucked the strong current. For the most part, it was stiff poling, which left the back numb at the end of the long hours.

Often they were compelled to get out the tracking line, and, walking the shore, tow the boat up through water too strong for poles to push her. Past high shores and cut-banks through which the spring freshets had gouged their way; past black spruce and tamarack, splashed here and there by poplar, painted by the first frost, day after day travelled the canoe. Often, an eagle or a northern raven, surprised at his meal of dead fish, left the shore ahead to drift lazily up the valley. Once a band of caribou crossed within rifle shot, but the cased guns were lashed in the boat against an upset, and, amid wild splashing, the coveted "red meat" landed and disappeared into the scrub. And nowhere on the shores of the wild river did they meet with signs of a portage or old camp ground.

As he watched the wilderness panorama unfold before him, the realization that it was free country — untrapped, theirs, by the law of the north — thrilled Brock to the marrow.

Then one day the river forked.

"Which way?" asked Brock, trailing his paddle as he splashed his russet head and hot face with water, the veins on his thick forearms swollen from exertion.

"We tak' sout' branch," replied the stern-man. "Once, to de nord of Starving Riviere divide, my fader saw beeg lak'. It might be headwater of dis branch."

"He was headed for that lake country when he left your camp last winter, wasn't he?"

Gaspard nodded. "He went to look ovair de country for game sign. Old Tetu, de medicine man, tell him at de Christmas trade dat Matchi Manitou, de devil, live ovaire dem hills, and de Windigo, too, but my fader laugh. He tell heem he had present for de devil w'en he met heem — a leetle lead one he carry een hees rifle."

"They couldn't scare Pierre Lecroix. He couldn't have starved, Gaspard. He was too good a hunter; he must have met with an accident."

"No, he had plenty grub w'en he left an' he was best hunter een dis countree." Gaspard's voice roughened to huskiness as he spoke of the father he had loved. "Somet'ing happen — he nevaire starve so long as he can travel."

"Queer thing not a dog ever worked his way back — wolves, I suppose."

"Not a dog!"

For a space they sat in silence while the canoe drifted, the dark face of Gaspard Lecroix bitter with the memory of his lost father.

"I promised to cut a lop-stick at all forks," said Brock, at length. "Father said if we didn't show up ten days after the ice cleared the Starving, next spring, he was coming to hunt for us."

So, in order to indicate to a relief party that they had taken the south branch, the boys cut the lower limbs from a spruce prominent on a point of shore above the fork.

Throughout the north in this manner is the attention of voyageurs attracted, sometimes to a grave, more often to a cache, or a message burned on the blazed and conspicuous trunk; and sometimes, to honor an individual or celebrate an event, the Indians cut a lop-stick.

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE ROAD TO NO-MAN'S LAND

The following night the boys made their first camp on the south branch, with the roar of white-waters in their ears. The hills had closed in on the river. Above was a gorge, that bain of all voyageurs, which might necessitate the infinite labor of packing canoe and freight up over a steep portage trail cut by their axes. In the morning, they went upstream and reconnoitred the rapids. The gorge was not long, not over a quarter mile, but full of flumes and cross currents, treacherous and awe-inspiring. But the small black eyes which studied it from the high shores were the eyes of a natural white-water man, born to a canoe.

"What do you think? It looks pretty bad to me," said Brock, when the boys had followed the rapids up to the head of the narrows.

"I t'ink I see a channel — we weel try."

"But we can't risk losing our stuff, Gaspard," protested his doubting friend. "An upset in that white-water means sneaking home, starved out, if we don't get drowned or cracked on the head by those boulders."

"We can make it," insisted the older youth.

"Well, if you say so, I am willing to take the chance," answered the other.

Then they cut and trimmed two extra spruce setting-poles for an emergency and, with Gaspard in the bow, the place of authority and honor in poling white-water, they pushed the nose of the canoe into the tail of the first chute. Gaspard's trained eyes and "nose for water" had not misled him. Slowly upstream climbed the craft, pushed by the setting poles. At times, bracing themselves, they would hold the canoe with the poles motionless in the current, while they took a "breather." It was hot work, thrusting the heavily loaded Peterboro up against the pull of the roaring river, but the keen eyes of the bow-man ferretted out the safe, black-water channels which he had traced from the cliff above, and as yet, the boat had hardly scraped a rock.

A hundred yards more and they would clear the gorge. Eyes smarting from sweat, the veins of his thick, brown arms bulging from the exertion, his

legs braced securely against thwart and gunwale, Brock closely followed each movement of the bowman, thrusting with all the power of his stout, young body. As their voices were smothered by the thunder of the churning water, it was from training and instinct and by the eye alone, that the stern-man divined the intention, and supported each effort, of the swart pilot who chose the course. With spray splashing legs, and tarpaulin covering their precious flour, slowly the heavily loaded canoe worked past knife-edged rocks and boulders buried in foam, while the roar of the river filled the gorge.

As yet the Peterboro had not hit hard enough to leak a drop. Brock began to breathe more easily. The danger which threatened their winter on the Yellow-Leg — their very lives, was nearly passed. Then, as they neared the head of the rapids, the only possible channel swung to mid-stream, past toothed ledges, and boulders over which the river churned into a chaos of foam. A slip of a pole here, the failure of the stern-man to hold when Gaspard lifted for another thrust, and boat and crew would be swept into the hungry maw of the rapids, to be tossed, broken, upon the shore, miles below, mute witnesses to the wrath of the Yellow-Leg.

As they held the canoe, momentarily, with their poles, while the cool Gaspard measured the danger

ahead, Brock threw a quick glance down stream over the menacing way they had come. No, if they made a mistake there was not a chance for them. The faces of the loved ones at Starving River appeared to him for an instant, as in a flashlight. Then clamping his jaws, he bowed his broad back as the bow-man nodded and, lifting his pole, drove the canoe out into the flume.

Angling upstream, following the black-water, they fought their way, time after time edging the nose of the canoe off the lip of disaster as the drive of the current caught the craft and held it, trembling, while two spruce poles bent under the tense bodies of the canoemen. But always, in the end, they won against the ruthless river and went doggedly on, grazing destruction by inches — dodging the bared teeth of pinnacle rocks by the breadth of a paddle. Then, near the head of the rapids, the channel again swung sharply. A false move here and the nose of the boat would be caught and lifted into a boulder, over which the current barely swelled, rolling and filling the canoe.

As he started to make the turn, Gaspard braced his knees, and, leaning outboard, thrust with all his power, while Brock swung the stern. Slowly, while his pole bowed, the arched body of the bow-man straightened out over the water against the

pull of the flume, while Brock inched the loaded canoe forward. Gradually responding, the craft was moving past the bulge of water on her beam, when the bending pole of the bow-man snapped short off.

With a shiver, the canoe yawed into the rock as the cat-like Gaspard, seizing the gunwale with one hand as he fell, made a side leap to the boulder, barely under water. While Brock thrust desperately with his pole to ward off the ruin which menaced, the half-breed's stiffened body, a bridge of flesh and bone between canoe and boulder, held the boat motionless as the current pulled at his legs.

For a space, the Yellow-Leg trip, the lives of the crew, hung in the balance; for once grounded, the heavy canoe would roll, fill and break up, and swept down through the chaos of flumes and cross-currents, the rocks would soon pound the heads of the crew to pulp.

Then Brock McCain learned the meaning of the term, "white-water man." As he desperately held the canoe against the thrust of the flume, black despair in his heart, his hopeless eyes on his friend, the straining bow-man motioned down stream with his head.

They would drop back below the turn. But could they do it?

Gradually Brock eased the craft down stream while Gaspard's stiffened body propped off the canoe, and, as the bow cleared the boulder, with a leap the half-breed reached the boat and had his spare pole in his hands.

For a space the canoe was safe. The poles held her snubbed in the channel and the panting but victorious crew, unable to make themselves heard, grinned and nodded congratulations. Then the bow-man turned his head to study the river above them while Brock waited for his decision.

To drop back, now, when they had fought so close to their goal seemed unthinkable to the boy who watched the dark head of his friend. It was as safe to go ahead as to try to snub the boat down stream. Then he thrilled with excitement as the indomitable Gaspard signalled with a toss of the head upstream.

They would try it again! They were going through!

"We'll make it this time!" muttered the stubborn Scotch lad through his teeth.

Again they started up the black water. Again they reached the boulder at the turn and Gaspard straightened out against the drive of the flume on the bow. Once more Brock's broad back bowed in a savage thrust as he swung the stern. Slowly the

nose of the canoe responded. This time the pole of the bow-man did not betray him. Now, the boulder was off the Peterboro's beam — now, the stern. Then, with a fierce thrust of both poles, the boat cleared the turn and was — free.

Ten more minutes of stiff poling and they pushed through the first suck at the head of the rapids and had won.

The happy boys turned in to the shore above the rapids, where the dogs waited for them, to boil the kettle and rest.

"By the great horned owl, old partner!" cried Brock into Gaspard's ear, as he leaped out of the canoe and seized his grinning friend's hand, "you're quicker on your feet than a scared rabbit. How you ever saved yourself from a dive into the river, and caught and held the bow, beats me. Not many bow-men on this coast could do it!"

"I feel de pole start to go and change my feet," laughed Gaspard. "Eet was bad mess for us, eh?"

"Bad mess? Why I could see the old boat roll and fill, and the stuff sail down river with two broken headed and drowned trappers. Old boy, you're a strong-water man, for sure!" And Brock slapped the grinning Gaspard affectionately on the back.

As the smoke from their fire drifted lazily into the

still September air, and the boys drank their tea and ate their warmed-over bannock and fried pike in silence, the drumming of the rapids checking easy conversation, from the bluff on the north shore a pair of beady eyes, in a swart face, watched them from the cover of the spruce scrub.

Finishing their lunch, the voyageurs went on, their dogs following the shore, but until they rounded a bend and disappeared, the narrowed eyes in the spruce scrub never left the canoe which was boldly making its way into the mysterious hinterlands of the Yellow-Leg.

CHAPTER V

THE LOVE OF A DOG FOR A BOY

Day by day, as the Peterboro put the coast farther behind and the valley of the south branch narrowed, the ridges grew higher and the timber of the shores heavier and more varied. Jack-pine and fir now joined the spruce and tamarack, and here and there among the blazing poplars appeared clumps of golden-hued white birch. The round-toed tracks of travelling caribou often marked sand-bar and mud flat, together with the foot-prints of that master fisherman, the otter, and his small brother, the mink. On a strip of beach, the elongated pads of a bear's feet, with their sharp

claws, had left their impress as he searched for dead fish. The whistle of snipe and river yellow-legs was constantly in their ears, and occasional families of grey geese, which had summered in the ponds of the back country and were bunching for the long migration, rose at their approach. And, one day, a raucous clamor from the shore ahead stopped Brock's paddle midway in its swing, as he turned, open-mouthed, to the grinning Gaspard.

"What in thunder's that?" he demanded.

" 'Hoopeeng crane! He howl louder dan a lynx een March."

"Whooping crane! I've never heard one, before! Gee, but that feller's got lungs!"

Then, from the beach, a half-mile away, lifted three great grey birds, necks straight before them, unlike the herons, who fly with necks curved, to flap up stream and disappear.

Saving their salt geese and pork for the winter, for days the boys had lived largely on river pike and doré, or pick-perch, which their net, set at night and lifted in the morning, brought them. In this way they saved the valuable time which they would have lost fishing with a line and spoon. But one day a rapids offered them a chance of a welcome change of diet to the red, beef-like flesh of the rock sturgeon.

Making camp at the foot of the quick-water, they hurried through supper. At dusk, Gaspard poled through the "boilers" to the last drop where he anchored the boat against the current with his pole, while Brock stood in the bow, in his left hand a birch-bark torch, lighting the shoals before him; in his right, an iron-barbed sturgeon spear with a braided raw-hide line attached to the head.

"Nothing here!" called Brock, as he peered into the black water off the bow, searching for the blurred shapes of the great fish which lie at the foot of a quick-water.

Gaspard edged the canoe across current until the boat lay below the main chute. Suddenly the alert bow-man called: "Hold her!"

The boat stopped, propped by the pole, as the bow-man lunged with the spear at a shadow off the nose of the canoe. But in his eagerness, Brock had leaned too far. As he put his weight behind the thrust of the spear, he pushed the bow of the empty boat from under him and with lighted flambeau followed his lunge headlong into the river.

At the same instant the splash of a huge tail and the churning of the water beyond the swimming Brock told the grinning Gaspard that the spear had struck home.

"You go ashore!" he called to the man in the

water, as the canoe swung down-stream with the current. "I get dat feesh!"

Scrambling to the bow of the boat, Gaspard seized the taut, raw-hide line made fast to a thwart and, as he drifted, slowly checked the rush of the impaled fish. Twice he got the sturgeon up to the boat. Twice, in desperate plunges, the huge fish again took out the stout line. Then the sturgeon gradually weakened, and poling up stream, Gaspard towed his catch ashore and ended the struggle with a rifle bullet.

Above, the swimming Brock was met half way to the camp by two hairy rescuers. Whining their solicitude for his safety as they churned the current with piston-like strokes, Flash and Yellow-Eye sought their master in the gloom of the swift, black water.

"Get away, Flash!" objected Brock as, reaching him, the puppy's sharp nails scraped his arm, and eager teeth sought for a grip on his shirt. "Go back, Yellow-Eye, you old fool! Don't you think I can swim this brook?" And Brock pushed away his would-be rescuers as his feet touched bottom.

Leaving his fish on the opposite shore out of reach of the dogs, Gaspard crossed with the canoe. "I tole you to hold back, w'en you struck," he laughed.

"I hit him though!" cried Brock, squeezing the cold water from his shirt and jeans. "Did you land him?"

"Ah-hah! We go now for anoder."

"You bet! How big was he?"

"Oh, 'bout hunder pound."

"Good boy! I'm sturgeon hungry," said Brock, smacking his lips. "Let's get enough to smoke."

So a new shaft was fitted to the spear head, for the first had been torn loose by the struggles of the sturgeon and lost. Again with flaming birch-bark, Brock, shivering with cold and eagerness to keep his feet in the boat, searched the foot of the rapids. The next thrust was a miss but this time the bowman kept his feet. Hauling in his spear, he continued to watch the shallows. Suddenly a black shadow moved across the bow. A well aimed lunge, and a frantic rock sturgeon went plunging downstream fast to Brock's line. In an hour, they had struck two more while the dogs on the beach filled the night with their protests at not having a share in the sport out in the dark.

Building a fire, for light, on a shelving rock of the opposite shore, the boys cut the beef-like flesh of the fish into strips for smoking and cached the meat in a spruce, then, with a carcass for the dogs, returned to camp.

In the morning they learned that a mile of shallow rapids, impracticable for poling or tracking the heavy canoe, reached above them, forcing the swamping out with axes of a portage trail over which canoe and cargo could be packed. Until noon, Brock and Gaspard toiled up the river shore with back loads slung on their leather tumplines. On his last trip down stream Brock found that his tireless partner had left only a ninety pound bag of flour and the Peterboro. Lifting the bow of the inverted canoe, which was built of cedar and weighed one hundred pounds, he rested it in the branches of a neighboring spruce. Then he slung the bag to his back, slipped the line over his forehead, and walking under the center thwart, raised the boat on his shoulders, balanced it with his hands, and started up the trail.

It was a clumsy load to handle — the canoe and the bag, but the seventeen year old bushman was proud of his strength. As he made his way over the carry, Flash, who, unlike the other dogs, seldom roamed far from his master in search of mice and snow-shoe rabbits, ranged in the scrub near him. When Brock, tired from his struggle with brush and stiff spruce branches constantly threatening the balance of the boat on his shoulders, reached an abrupt ascent in the trail, he peered from un-

der the canoe for a convenient spruce in which to rest the bow. He had covered half the carry with his unwieldy load and his neck and shoulders ached with cramp. But he stood in a thicket of alders and willow.

Beyond, at the top of the slope, the portage again entered the spruce, so he started the climb. Sweat ran from his forehead, banded by the tumpline head-piece, into his eyes, but he kept on with his unwieldy one hundred and ninety pounds. Shortly, to his smarting eyes the trail became a blur. Still, doggedly, his stout legs pushed his load up the slope. A few yards more and he would reach the spruce and have a rest.

But as the tired Brock gained the level, his sweat-blinded eyes failed to notice a projecting root. He tripped and stumbled forward in a desperate endeavor to regain his balance, when a smashing blow from the gunwale of the falling boat crumpled him on the trail.

Presently, back over the portage trotted a slate-grey and white husky, ears pricked, eyes searching for the familiar legs of the master moving up the trail under the boat. But a whimper of bewilderment left the throat of the puzzled puppy as he approached the canoe lying on the carry. Reaching the boat in a few bounds, he saw a bare forearm

thrust from under the gunwale. A sniff at the limp hand sufficed for recognition, but the hand lay motionless under the ministrations of his red tongue. Then Flash began to scratch furiously at the forest mold interlaced with claw-defying roots, to reach Brock's face. But the spruce roots blocked him. Frantic, now, he leaped the boat to find space beneath the opposite gunwale in which to thrust his nose. Withdrawing his head, his fore-feet worked like mad throwing behind him leaves and earth. He pushed his head under the gunwale and sniffed long, with low whines of alarm, at the grey face of the one he loved. But his pleading drew no answer.

Then the wolf strain in the despairing puppy impelled him to sit beside the strangely silent master, and lifting his nose, pour out his grief in long drawn howls.

Back in the forest Yellow-Eye, Slit Ear and Kona heard, and wailed their answer. But the fret of the rapids drowned all sound to the ears of the man who was cooking by a fire at the head of the carry.

Again Flash thrust his head under the canoe and strove with eager tongue to rouse the man who did not speak. Then, for a space, uncertain, he worried back and forth beside the boat, stopping at intervals to voice his fear to the insensate forest. Fi-

nally, with a farewell lick of the hand which had so often caressed him, the big puppy started on a lope up the trail.

Watching a kettle of boiling sturgeon, Gaspard sat smoking, back against a tree, when Flash appeared.

"'Allo Flash!" hailed the man. "Why you leave Brock? He must be long piece back wid dat big load."

The puppy was plainly excited. Running to Gaspard, he whined nervously, then broke into a wild yelping.

"W'at de matter wid you, pup?"

The dog sprang at the man, now interested, and rearing on his hind feet, beat him with his fore paws, then leaped away and disappeared down the portage, yelping furiously as he ran. Gaspard scratched his head. "W'at's he got down dere? He stay wid Brock most de tam. Why he leave Brock?" muttered the puzzled youth.

Shortly the dog returned and again sprang on the perplexed Gaspard, yelping excitedly in his face.

"Somet'ing down dat trail. Wal, Flash, we go and see w'at mak' de trouble."

So, alternately, running ahead and back-tracking, to learn if he was being followed, Flash led the way. They were approaching the invisible boat

when the dog disappeared and shortly Gaspard heard a chorus of yelps. Then, turning a bend, the sight of the Peterboro lying on the trail turned the half-breed cold with fear. Running to the canoe, he lifted it from the still shape beneath, while the mystified puppy nuzzled at the grey face of Brock McCain.

"By gar!" gasped the frightened youth, kneeling beside the limp body of his friend. Brock hurt — killed, and he had promised to take care of him. What would he tell them at home? Old Brock whom he loved, lying there like a dead man. Was it his neck — broken? Fearfully he placed his ear to the chest, but the beating heart assured him. A broken bone — two hundred miles from Hungry House! The thought made him weak with dread. His nervous fingers tested the arms and legs while the puppy's cold nose nuzzled the inert body. Then turning the head of the unconscious youth, he found a great purple bruise on the forehead.

"Ah-hah!" breathed Gaspard, relieved. "Hit by de boat!"

Running to the river, he filled his felt hat with water and dashed it in Brock's face. Slowly the boy opened his eyes.

"Gee! That — was a — mean one!" muttered the dazed lad.

With a yelp the excited Flash nuzzled his master, returned from the dead.

"You feel all right except de head, Brock?" demanded the fearful half-breed, bending over the still dazed Brock.

"Yep — all right!" Brock slowly moved his arms and legs. "But I twisted my neck a bit," he added, with a grimace.

"You lie still, now!" sternly ordered the other, as Brock, attempting to sit up, winced with pain.

"Didn't see that root there — I was tired — and here I am."

Again Gaspard's searching fingers explored Brock's body, but found no symptoms of severe injury. In a half hour the bruised boy felt much stronger, and was able to walk to the head of the carry.

"The tea will do you good," said his friend. "To-morrow you feel same as ever."

"Dat ees smart pup, dat Flash," said Gaspard that night to Brock, lying in his blankets beside the fire, when his friend had rubbed his neck and shoulders with hot grease. "W'en you get hurt, he come here an' tell me to follow jes lak' he talk."

"Oh, he's got brains," agreed Brock, "and he's

more affectionate than any husky I ever saw." The boy squeezed a hairy ear of the great puppy who lay beside him. "He's sure game, too. Remember the fight he had before he lost his milk-teeth, with that black-and-white pup of father's?"

"Ah-hah! He ees cross dog een a fight. Before de spreeng he geeve old Yellow-Eye some troubl'."

"I hate to have them fight it out, but I suppose they will. He won't take orders from Yellow-Eye in a few months."

Three days later the country flattened out before the voyageurs. There was water ahead. The river widened, and, turning a bend, they saw, reaching away before them to blue ridges splashed with gold, the flat surface of a large lake.

"The headwaters!" cried the delighted Brock, thrilled with the beauty of the tranquil landscape. "Gee, but this is a handsome lake!"

"Must be more beyond dis," replied Gaspard, shielding his eyes with a brown hand as he stood to survey the quiet miles of sleeping lake.

Then, as the young hunters, happy over the end of their slavery on the river, left the outlet and started up the long lake, two of the dogs, watching them from the beach, plunged in and swam toward the boat.

"You Flash and Kona!" shouted Brock, "you

think old Brock would desert his pups? Go back there and follow the shore!"

Turning in, Brock drove the swimming dogs ashore and the canoe continued up the first headwater lake.

CHAPTER VI

THE HEADWATERS

After long days of slavery with pole, paddle and line, they had reached their goal. Brock's freckled face beamed with a smile of satisfaction at the thought that, never before, so far as anyone knew, had a white man dipped a paddle in these waters; his blue eyes lit with the thought that he and Gaspard were the first voyageurs to gaze across the burnished surface of this lake to far hills, misty with autumn haze. To what risks — what perils, lay before them when the "freezing moon" of the Crees swung above the ridges and the northers from the Bay drove south, locking lakes and

streams with ice, and the "long snows" blanketed forest and muskeg, he gave no thought. They were well provisioned, but of course would need much fish and game to carry the dogs and themselves through to the break-up of the river ice in May. But caribou surely roamed the muskegs of the back country and such a lake contained fish. They would make out all right.

And then with what a fur pack this untrapped country should send them home to Hungry House and the envy of the Crees at the trade! Mink and otter and beaver, fisher and marten and lynx, wolf and fox — there should be some handsome fox pelts, black and cross and silver-grey, in this untrapped wilderness of the Yellow-Leg. And the things they would trade them for! Dogs for Gaspard, a Peterboro canoe of his own for Brock, new rifles and outfit for the next winter's hunt.

"We got 'bout t'ree week to net feesh and cruise out trap-line," broke in Gaspard on the pleasant thoughts of Brock.

"This ought to be a prime trout and white-fish lake," replied Brock, "judging from the clear water. I can see the boulders on the bottom and I'll bet there's twenty feet under us."

"Dere will be oder lak' above dis one. We fin' out and den we go to feeshing," suggested the shrewd Gaspard.

Half-way to the head of the lake, the treeless nob of a hill which seemed to command a view of the country inland drew the explorers ashore. They climbed to the bald brow and looked.

"We're on the headwaters! Look at those lakes over there!" cried Brock. To the east, beyond low ridges, water shimmered in the afternoon sun. Unless they were on a long point of an irregular lake they had reached the headwater chain. To the south, dun-colored muskeg, splashed with ponds and patches of green scrub, reached away to the horizon.

"Caribou country! And this chain of lakes is bound to be full of fish. We can't starve out here, old boy!"

Gaspard smiled at his young friend's enthusiasm. "Plenty feesh now, mebbe, but you t'ink you always get dem under de ice?"

"I know you don't when they're not moving, but we're going to pile the cache full of 'em before the freeze up."

"I hope so," replied the wiser partner.

"And we're going to save half our goose and flour for spring and live on the country this winter."

"Yes, we live on game so long she stay."

"That's good deer country to the south, or I'm no judge. I can almost see the grey caribou moss from here."

"I t'ink I see deer now," calmly rejoined the other.

"What?"

"Crossing dat creek dere — t'ree of dem!"

"Gaspard, I believe you're right! They look like muskrats from here."

That evening, in camp near the head of the lake, Brock sang in sheer joy as he swung his axe into a dry spruce for the cooking fire, then hung half-cured sturgeon steaks on a frame over a smudge to smoke. Now, if the fur sign were plentiful in the back country, they would pitch their tent in a sheltered spot somewhere on one of the tributary streams and prepare for winter in earnest. But there was no time to lose. September was dying and the nights turning frosty. Quantities of fish must be netted, the country cruised over and trap-lines laid out, wood cut. The days before the first ice would be busy ones. As they sat on the beach eating bannock and fried sturgeon, steaming cups of tea at their sides, while the dogs sprawled near them, Gaspard's jaws suddenly ceased munching a mouthful of fish. Leaning forward, he gazed intently across the mirror of lake reflecting the blue masses of the hills and the sunset sky, where a pair of loons, at intervals, waked the evening peace with maniacal laughter.

"What you see?" demanded Brock.

"Deer! See dat ripple?" Two miles away, far beyond the loons, a wedge-shaped ripple, like a mammoth arrow head, broke the flat surface, where two dark spots moved toward a long point.

"Shall we try for them? We need all the meat we can get," cried Brock, springing to his feet, followed by the interested Flash, curious of the cause of his master's quick movement.

There was no time to unload the canoe which lay in the water, if they were to head off the swimming caribou, called "deer," by the northern Crees. Leaping into the boat and kneeling, the churn-swish, churn-swish, of their rapid stroke drove the craft toward the point of land toward which the caribou were heading. It was doubtful on that still evening that the canoe could be brought within rifle-shot of the game before they started a stampede for the shore. Once they sensed their danger and started to churn the water with their broad, flexible hooves, the boys knew that they would be distanced, for two men in a loaded canoe are no match for fear-maddened caribou. But caribou have poor sight and dull perception and not until the craft was within long rifle-shot did they become aware of their danger and turn. Then the water boiled behind them as they lengthened out to their work.

"Come on!" urged Brock over his shoulder, "let's give 'em a race!"

Savagely the paddles tore the water in unison as the boys lunged with all the power of their sinewy backs and shoulders. The bold bow of the pursuing Peterboro lifted and dipped, nosing a deep ripple out over the quiet surface. Three hundred yards away, shoulder to shoulder, two panic-stricken caribou, nostrils distended by pumping lungs, eyes bloodshot with fear, plowed the water; their tireless legs, thrashing like the piston rods of an engine, throwing behind them a wake of foam.

For a space, under the vicious stroke of the canoemen the boat held its own, then the strain of the long sprint began to tell. Gradually the stroke dropped and the white sterns and erect tails of the fleeing beasts, who lifted themselves half out of water in their desperate efforts, slowly drew away. The canoe rode too deeply for speed. The chase was over.

Turning with a laugh, Brock stopped paddling as he gasped between breaths: "They win — deserve to! How those critters climbed through that water!"

The hard breathing Gaspard grinned. "We get dem — in de spreeng — w'en we starve out," he answered drily.

"Well, there's more where they came from. It was too long a water shot."

"I t'ink I could hit dem, but it is bad — wounding game, and losing dem."

"No, it's not right — when we don't need the meat. Father says never take a long shot."

"Look at dem now!"

Brock turned to look as the caribou landed and, breaking from the water in fountains of foam, vanished in the scrub.

Over the returning canoe two huge northern ravens flapped lazily.

"Thought they were in for a feed, I suppose," remarked Brock, "but we fooled 'em. The dogs think we have something too."

On the beach four fretting huskies waited, shoulder deep in the water, red tongues dripping in anticipation of tid-bits.

"No, you old glutton," laughed Brock, as Flash sniffed eagerly into the beached canoe, "no red meat for the pup; they beat us easily."

CHAPTER VII

THE FOOTPRINTS ON THE BEACH

From daylight to dusk of the days following, the trappers raced against the winter which one day without warning would close in on the valley of the Yellow-Leg, sheathing the coves of the lakes and the dead-waters of the rivers with a film of ice, smothering the sun while powdery snow whitened ridges and barrens. For their main camp, they chose the sheltered valley of a stream which emptied into the second lake of the three composing the headwaters, and in the wind-break of a heavy stand of spruce convenient to the river, pitched their tent. This, banked high with snow and heated by the folding tent-stove of sheet iron, which Brock's father had given them, would be

snug in the bitterest weather. Near by, they trimmed and peeled standing spruce saplings and built a platform cache as a storehouse for food, high above the reach of the dogs, and stray animals which might find it in their absence. And to check prowling wolverines from climbing the slippery uprights, they circled each spruce with a necklace of inverted fish hooks. Then, setting the net which was visited each morning, the boys began to store lake-trout and whitefish. Along the water courses, in the swamps and on the ridges, east, south and west, they searched for game signs, blazing trails on which they would run trap-lines when the snow came. The multitude of rabbit trails in the poplar and willow thickets promised lynx and fox. In the creek valleys beaver dams and houses were numerous. The barrens to the south were networked by the deeply worn trails of caribou. Here, one day, they surprised two fat, black bears gorging themselves on blueberries, and obtained, with the meat for themselves and the dogs, many pounds of back fat which they tried out into useful grease. The country north of the lakes, for lack of time, they did not enter.

Swiftly the mellow days of the northern Indian summer passed. At dusk the air was crisp with frost and the hush of the forest broken by the

voices of the geese drifting south from the Bay. One evening as Gaspard and Brock sat by their fire outside the tent, overhauling and greasing their traps while the dogs lay curled beside them, each with nose in bushy tail, Brock suddenly looked up to the stars which seemed to hang low over the spruce tops.

"What in thunder's that?" he asked in open-mouthed amazement, as a call, sonorous, martial, like the notes of a bugle, floated down through the crisp stillness of the night.

Gaspard nodded his head. "Eet not be long tam now — de freeze-up. W'en de swan pass de snow follow, soon."

"Swans? Never heard 'em before!" said the surprised Brock, his ears straining to catch the march music of the white trumpeters of the skies. "Gee!" he continued, after a space, with an admiring shake of the head, "that sure beats the 'gou-louk' of the old grey boys. I'd like to see 'em up there against the stars."

Then, one day, when they had cut firewood on the ridge behind the camp until their backs were stiff, Brock suggested: "We've just got time enough to look at that little river across the lake before it gets dark. It ought to be good mink and otter country, and I'm sick of this axe."

So they paddled across the two miles of restless lake, grey under the lead-colored sky. At the mouth of the stream, which was on the north shore, a mud beach offered a good landing for a canoe. Drawing up the boat, Gaspard started up the shore ahead of Brock, when, suddenly, he quickened his pace.

"What's up?" demanded the other, searching the lake shore ahead for the cause of his friend's action.

Gaspard stopped, pointing to the mud at his feet.

"By the great horned owl, a canoe!" cried the excited Brock. "We've never landed here!"

"No, dere ees no keel — eet ees a birch-bark." The frowning eyes of the speaker traversed the beach near them; then, with a significant "Ah-hah!" Gaspard walked a few steps and pointed to something at his feet.

Brock followed, to stare wide-eyed at the barely distinguishable imprints of human feet.

"Moccasin track — Injun!"

"How can y' tell who made 'em?" demanded the excited Brock. "They must be pretty old. It's rained since they were made, and there's been no rain since we got here."

Gaspard was silent. Leaving Brock, he walked a few yards, his eyes searching the beach, then

suddenly stopped and bent over, busy with the problem before him. Shortly, with a nod of finality, he turned to Brock.

"White man, here!" he said soberly.

Brock stared at the faint footprints in incredulous wonder, well aware that, had he been alone, they would have escaped his less practised eye. "I can just make 'em out," he said, "but what makes you think it was a white man?"

Gaspard pointed to the two footprints.

"Injun track turn in; white man walk straight."

"Yes, I see it now," admitted Brock, "but what could bring a white man here — where would he come from?" Then across Brock's brain flashed the memory of the strange schooner at the mouth of the Yellow-Leg. His jaw dropped as his eyes opened with the surmise, "That schooner!" he gasped. "Free traders!"

Gaspard's lean face hardened. "Ah-hah! Dey travel dis country nord of here — left some hunter — mebbe."

"Queer, we saw no camp-ground on the way up river," said Brock, when he had recovered from his first surprise. "So we may have to share this country, after all. I thought we were the first to see it," he added ruefully.

"Dey will not like to find us here — dose people. We have troubl' yet."

At the words of his friend, the fighting blood of generations of pioneer ancestors heated in Brock's veins. "Try to drive us out, eh?" he rasped, his blue eyes flaming. "Look here, you and I can shoot all around most Indians, can't we? We know that! Are we going to be run out of this country, where we've got as much right as they have?" Gaspard thrust out a sinewy hand which his friend impulsively gripped.

"We stay!" said the half-breed, quietly, his swart face set like stone.

Striking through the timber, the boys followed the stream back into the hills. But their roving eyes were not intent on game signs. As they travelled they searched along the shores of the creek for footprints in the mud, old camp-grounds, blazed trees, wood cuttings, traps — anything which would prove that someone was wintering north of them on the Yellow-Leg headwaters. But in the end, unenlightened, they turned back to their canoe and crossed the lake.

That night, as Brock lashed with raw-hide to cross pieces, two long, six inch strips of birch, planed to a quarter inch in thickness and curled at one end by steaming, from time to time he glanced curiously at his companion busied with the foot lashings of a pair of snow-shoes.

"What's on your mind, Gaspard?" he said, at length. "You've been mulling over something for the last hour."

Gaspard lifted a face so bitter that Brock abruptly stopped work on his trapping sled. "Out with it, my lad; no secrets between partners!"

The face of the half-breed softened as he met his friend's curious eyes, but he did not answer.

"You know," continued Brock, "I've been wondering whether these people didn't travel across from the Carcajou country. That would explain our seeing no camp-grounds on the river."

Busy with the foot lacing of his snow-shoe, Gaspard did not reply.

"You don't suppose they were here last year?" the boy burst out, in excitement, as the thought of the elder Lecroix flashed across his mind.

The dark face of Gaspard was knotted with pain as he turned to his friend. The glitter of hate, so implacable, so ruthless, in the small eyes of Lecroix, filled the one who watched with awe. Never before had Brock seen that look in the eyes of his friend.

"You think — they — these men, whose tracks we saw — met — your father?" gasped Brock, his heart speeding at the realization of the meaning of his surmise.

"I t'ink dese men know — w'at become — of my

fader," replied Gaspard, deliberately, his brooding eyes again seeking the fire.

"You think he was killed, Gaspard?" cried Brock.

"He was ver' good man een de bush; he nevaire starve out."

"And his dogs — some would come back if the wolves didn't get them."

"Ah-hah, dey would come home."

"Well," said Brock, after an interval of hard thinking, "if they did away with your father for coming into this country, they'll try to do the same with us — shoot us from ambush or steal our grub and burn the tent when we're away on the lines."

Gaspard nodded in agreement.

"We'll have to move our camp, at once."

"On de first snow I go back into dat countree nord of de lac an' look for dose peopl'."

In the silence, from a distant ridge, drifted a faint call. With hair stiff on neck and back, the dogs rose from where they lay, hairy throats rumbling in anger as their pricked ears waited for a repetition of the wail. It came.

"De wolf, he hunt to-night," said Gaspard, as the aroused huskies, pointing noses at the frosted stars, howled back their challenge to the ancient enemy across the soundless forest.

Like an omen of evil, the wail of the wolf struck upon the ears of Brock McCain. Into these bleak hills Pierre Lecroix and his dogs had gone, never to return. When the spring came to Hungry House would they wait in vain for the coming of the canoe which had left in August for the headwaters of the Yellow-Leg? Who knew?

CHAPTER VIII

THE FREEZING MOON

THEN, one day, a stinging north-wester drove down across Kiwedin, Ojibwa for "The Birthplace of the North Wind," bringing the snow to whiten hills, barrens, and forest floor and betray the journeyings of their restless hoofed and furred nomads. And following the snow, the withering winds off the ice-fields of the great bay began to lock the dead-waters of streams and the protected coves of lakes with a film of ice, which nightly crept farther from the shores. With the coming of the snow, the boys began hauling their frozen fish and goose and their outfit into the back country, to a new camp they had located in the valley of another stream, tributary to the lake, where the thick spruce timber provided both a wind-break and concealment.

And with the coming of the snow, started the education of the hulking Flash, who, the previous winter, had been too young to break to harness. Gradually, under the patient tutorship of Brock, the pup learned the meaning of Gee! and Haw! Soon, at the command, Marche! the twelve-months-old husky would leap into his collar and take his master scurrying over the young snow. And to Brock's delight, Flash, who, when free, had a tendency to trot rather than pace, in harness became a pacer. For in the dog lore of the north, the pacers have more endurance.

It was all a strange game to the high spirited Flash. At first, he strenuously resented being trussed about neck and ribs with a raw-hide harness and lashed to a sled. The humiliation and the curb upon his free movement puzzled and angered him. And yet, his love for the master who firmly but gently, with much soothing talk into the hairy ears, insisted on his daily lesson, eased his fret. When Flash understood that it was a kind of game that they played together — this pulling of the trapping sled; that Brock always followed, ever ready with praise and encouragement — he outgrew his desire to turn round and look back, to lie down and roll, to make a fuss when a leg straddled a trace, or wildly bolt after every fresh game trail he

crossed. And what frolics the great puppy and the boy had on the first good fall of snow! What rough and tumble wrestling matches in which, now Flash, now the one hundred and eighty pound Brock was on top! What mock snarlings and rumblings of mimic rage in the deep, hairy throat! What a show of white fangs which threatened dire injury to the shouting master, but never closed on arm or leg!

Week by week the generous fish and meat diet added weight and power to the puppy's massive frame, and now, in his superb double coat of slate-grey and white, he neared the fulfillment of the promise of his milktooth days. Of the team, Yellow-Eye, alone, outweighed him, and for weeks the two great dogs had never been left loose together. Already, in disputes over caribou tid-bits, Flash had quickly proved to both Slit-Ear and Kona that he was their master. With the mighty Yellow-Eye, king-dog of the mail team, and master of the sled-dogs at Hungry House, it would be different. Brock and Gaspard knew that a fight between these two great Ungavas would result in serious injury or death to one or both. Yet they realized that some day when Flash had grown to his full power and weight; some day in the spring, when the dogs were loose and alone, the two would fight it out.

For by the law of the north a sled-team must have its king-dog or chief.

November, the freezing moon of Cree and Ojibwa, found the young hunters following their trap-lines over ridges and barrens reaching far to the south and west. Brock, from choice, in the early winter, before the fierce temperature and the cutting winds started, wore a Hudson's Bay duffle capote, or hooded coat, belted at the waist, from which hung his skinning knife; while Gaspard preferred a slip-on coat of young caribou skin, with hair outside, and a hood lined with warm wolverine, the oily nature of which retarded the circling of his face with hoar frost formed by his breath, in the withering cold of midwinter. Around his waist, he wound a Cree sash, which, in emergency, could be used as a tumpline. On the water courses, where, in October, they had seen otter slides, beaver ponds and mink sign, their traps were set. Along the shores of lakes where foxes like to travel on the ice, strong smelling baits lured the wily but inquisitive beasts. Past thickets, where lynx and fox and wolverine prowl around the feeding grounds of the snow-shoe rabbit; through spruce and poplar, over star-lit ridges where marten, fisher and ermine dispute the wood-mice with the patrols of the snowy, grey, and horned owl, ran the lines of traps.

So, through November, when the fur is extra prime because as yet unworn by the travelling of its owners, while the snow deepened and the ice "made" on lake and river, the boys followed their lines. Twice a week each hunter camped out in a lean-to erected on the far end of his trapping trails in a thicket on the south side of a ridge. And the fifty miles of travelling on each round with the light sled, which carried blankets, provisions and cooking outfit, soon broke Flash to the ways of trace and trail. Over the wind-brushed ice of a stream or a packed lake trail, the powerful Ungava would take Brock mile after mile at a mad gallop: but in the soft, new snow of the timber, before the trails settled and grew hard, Brock led the way, while the heavy puppy floundered in the poor footing.

One day Brock and Flash were approaching the lean-to in the ridges to the west of the barrens, where he spent the night on each round of his traps. It had been a good day, for he had a cross-fox, two mink, and a fisher, or black cat, one of the most valuable of furs. The track of a wolverine near the trail led him to turn momentarily aside into the forest while Flash continued slowly with the sled toward the camp. Brock was examining the tracks of the carcajou or Injun-devil, who had turned back, suspicious of the sled trail, when he

heard Flash's angry challenge, followed by a snarl of rage.

Again the puppy's battle cry waked the still forest. Then there was a din as of maddened brutes fighting to the death.

"Great Scott!" gasped the startled Brock, fearful for the safety of his dog, handicapped by sled and harness, in a fight with a timber wolf. "There's a wolf in the trap and Flash has piled into him!"

Plunging up the trail on snow-shoes, Brock turned a bend to find his overturned sled with both traces snapped short off. Tearing his rifle from its skin case, he cocked it and ran on, his heart pounding with fear for the untried puppy he loved.

"Give it to him, Flash!" he encouraged. "Fight him, boy!"

Crashing through a thicket of young spruce he found them battling to their shoulders in the deep snow; a great, grey timber-wolf, who had torn loose from the trap, his muzzle smeared with blood and saliva, and the Ungava puppy, one slate-grey shoulder gashed red from the snap of knife-like fangs. In and out they lunged, wolf and dog, hacking, tearing at each other's thick coated neck and shoulders, snarling savagely as they fought; time and again slipping in the uncertain footing of

deep snow, to roll and flounder in a writhing mass of bodies, legs and snapping tusks. Brock rushed to the battle-mad beasts, seeking the chance to end the unequal fight with a rifle bullet, for the reckless Flash had challenged to a finish fight the craftiest and most ruthless foe of the forest world. Twice the excited boy attempted to line his sights and shoot, but the swiftly moving combatants made it too dangerous for the puppy. Time after time, in the manner of his kind, the wolf catapulted into Flash's shoulder, attempting to bowl him over and expose the dog's throat, but at each lunge the powerful husky met his foe half-way, or leaped aside, while tusks clicked on tusks as they floundered in the snow.

"Knock him down, Flash!" urged Brock, as the dog in turn, drove into the shoulder of his foe, sending him reeling, but, as he leaped for a drive at the throat, slipped and missed. "Get him, Flash!" begged the excited lad, thrilled by the unbelievable fight his untried and still immature puppy was waging against the scarred veteran of many a wilderness battle.

Then, forgetting the cocked gun in his hands while he urged on his dog, Brock's heart suddenly stopped, as the husky sprawled helplessly to his shoulders in deep snow. In a flash, recovering his

footing and bounding back, with bared fangs the wolf slashed downward on the exposed neck of the struggling puppy, opening a deep gash.

With a sob the boy thrust his rifle forward to shoot, but in his lunge at the sprawling dog, the wolf had left his throat open to the jaws beneath him. As his fangs ripped the husky's neck, Flash's long canines snapped with an upward thrust on the exposed jugular. A twist and wrench of the Ungava's thick neck and his tusks met in the throat of his foe — a lunge of the powerful legs and the dog drove the struggling wolf to the snow, beneath him. Another wrench and tear at the throat, and the wolf snarl died. Grinning horribly, with blood-smeared jaws, as he gasped out his life through a ripped jugular, the great beast writhed beneath the conquering dog, his blood staining the snow. Then, with a convulsive quiver, he lay still.

Trembling with battle lust, Flash snarled his hate as he shook and worried his dead foe. At last, satisfied, the wounded Ungava stood proudly erect over his kill, his thick tail curved above his back, and in the manner of his wolfish forbears howled his triumph and his challenge out across the frozen forest. On his knees, at the side of his dog, an overjoyed lad hugged the massive body. The raw puppy had won his spurs.

"You old son-of-a-gun, you! You killed him in fair fight! My Flash pup!" and with two great tears of emotion frozen on his wind-burned cheeks, Brock McCain poured into the pricked ear of his dog the incoherent love language which only a boy and a dog understand.

The slashes in Flash's neck and shoulder were painful but not dangerous, still, if neglected, would soon stiffen in the increasing cold, crippling his forelegs. So, drawing his sled, for the wounded neck of the dog could not bear the collar, Brock hastened to the lean-to camp and started a fire to cook supper and heat water. First washing out the wounds, while Flash whimpered with pain as he licked the hands which hurt him, Brock then bandaged the puppy's neck and shoulders with strips from an extra shirt. But as he ate his supper of caribou stew, the boy's face grew grave. It would be days before the wounded puppy could travel the twenty miles back to camp, and the food on the sled would last them but two. It meant leaving the dog in camp and finding "deer." If caribou were scarce, he could snare a few snow-shoe rabbits. Still, Brock was a growing boy with an enormous appetite and he disliked the idea of living on rabbit stew while the wounds of Flash healed. For rabbit is not satisfying to a healthy

appetite. The Crees have an expression, "Starving on rabbit," for they grow thin on a straight diet of the varying hare or snow-shoe rabbit, whose large hind-feet have given him his name.

So, snug in the low lean-to, built of spruce brush and wind-proofed by snow; in the fire hole, at the front of which blazed birch logs, Brock, with Flash beside him, slept soundly on a bed of boughs, wrapped in his plaited, rabbit-skin blankets, warmer than any fur. Noiseless — like a grey ghost — a snowy owl drifted by on his nightly patrol of the haunts of the wood mice, to light in a tree and fill the indigo forest with his "Whoo, hoo — hoo — hoo, Whóo — whoo!" From a distant ridge floated the mournful howl of a timber wolf. On the edge of the neighboring barren, a fox barked. Everywhere the toothed and clawed assassins of the forest night were hunting the violet shadows of the spruce, but boy and dog, oblivious, curled side by side before the fire, slept on.

Before dawn, Brock left the disappointed Flash at the camp, fastened to a tree by a leg, for his wounded neck would bear no collar, while he started to look for caribou. As the eastern sky greyed, then turned to a bitter blue, Brock, with his hood over his face, shivered in a clump of scrub spruce on the edge of a muskeg that reached away into the

shadow. Here, at dawn, the caribou, if there were any in the vicinity, would come to dig the snow with their round-toed hooves from the white reindeer moss which grows on the barrens of the north. But caribou are the great travellers of the wilderness, here to-day, to-morrow fifty miles away, and Brock waited anxiously for the light to filter across the white waste before him. He did not want to leave the stiff and crippled Flash tied in camp, and, in his condition, at the mercy of prowling wolves, while he went back to the main camp for food.

Gradually the east greyed and the shadows blanketing the plain of snow dotted here and there with scrub and small bushes, faded. Beating his arms and shoulders to start the circulation, Brock's sharp eyes began a minute inspection of the barren, for in half light the blue-grey shapes of caribou so blend into the background of snow as to be almost invisible.

Starting slowly from the forest at his right, Brock's eyes swept the barren. In the dim light he could see but a few hundred yards into the snowy plain, but caribou have poor eyes and if they were there, he knew he could boldly stalk them up-wind, while later, after sun-rise, it would be more difficult. So he studied the barren, as he shivered, his frosted breath rising in a column in the still air.

After a space, his wind-burned features lit with excitement. "There they are!" he muttered, reaching for his cased rifle. Two hundred yards away, two "deer," as caribou are called in the north, stood motionless.

Taking the gun from the case which protected the bore and action from the snow, Brock started deliberately up-wind toward his game, following the cover offered by a rise. It was rapidly growing lighter, and he had not walked fifty yards when he muttered in disgust:

"Fooled, by golly! Bushes!"

In the poor light the young hunter had been deceived by the resemblance which the snow-coated bushes bore to the shapes of caribou. Returning to the edge of the barren where he could stamp his feet and beat his arms in the biting air without attracting notice, Brock waited until the sun lifted to turn the expanse of snow before him into a shimmering plain of fire. It was no use; there were no deer within sight. After breakfast he would make a wide circle and follow the freshest tracks he could find, for he had resolved not to leave Flash and go back to the main camp for grub.

When he had heated and skinned out the fur which he had brought in the night before, he talked to his dog in a useless attempt to soothe him in his

disappointment at being tied up in camp when Brock took the trail.

With a parting, "Brock'll soon be back with some good red meat for Flash!" the boy started.

All day he skirted the great muskeg, picking up and following the freshest trails which led from it into the "bush," but saw no "deer." Unlike moose and the red, or "jumping deer," as they are called north of the Height-of-Land, when caribou start to travel, they travel far, and to come up with them sometimes means camping a night or two on the tracks. So, after shooting three snow-shoe rabbits, to save his face as a hunter with the dog who waited, Brock returned to camp.

"Nothing but three rabbits, old boy!" said Brock to Flash who greeted his appearance with a wild yelping. "Never put my eyes on a deer! Now in a couple of days when we don't show up, old Gaspard will start worrying about us and hit the trail this way to see what's happened. Still with that neck of yours and sore shoulder, I don't see anything we can do but stay right here, do you?"

The nose of the husky nuzzled the mittened hand of the boy who smiled down on him. Then the great jaws opened and shut lightly on the hand while the slant brown eyes pleaded with the master as the throat swelled in a deep rumble. Flash

wanted to be turned loose for a sniff at the rabbit trails, but his bandaged shoulder forbade it.

"You old devil, you!" mumbled Brock, leaning to place his hooded head against the hairy skull. "You would open that slash and be lame as a three-legged rabbit in no time if I let you go with me."

With his hand Brock could feel, in the massive chest, the vibration of the throat rumble which answered him. "Gosh, but you grow every day, old boy," he exclaimed, stroking the iron dorsal muscles of the dog's back. "How are we going to keep you and Yellow-Eye apart this winter?"

Again up before dawn, Brock spent another day on the trail of the caribou, but, although he saw a band crossing the barren at a great distance and followed numerous fresh trails, he never came up with them. He was approaching his camp and wondering if Flash had broken loose by gnawing his wire leash, when he was surprised by a chorus of yelps.

"Hello, there! Got worried, did you?" he called to his partner.

The dogs of the team, wired to separate trees, joined Flash in a vociferous welcome.

"Hello, Kona, Yellow-Eye, Slit-Ear, old socks! How're the pups?" Then not seeing a fire in the

hole in the snow and receiving no answer from Gaspard, he knew that his partner had arrived early and was off on a hunt of his own. Brock built up the fire and started a good supper with the beans and caribou steak which he found on Gaspard's sled. And, as a surprise, baked a huge bannock in the frying pan, tilted against a green log. As the early dusk filled the spruce with purple shadows, the sleeping dogs waked to the creak of snow-shoes on the dry November snow.

"Well, you old villain!" cried Brock, as Gaspard appeared, doubled under the tenderloin and haunches of a yearling caribou. "I hunted for two days and didn't get a shot, and you go out and get one in an hour!"

Gaspard tipped his heavy load into the snow — later to be strung up out of the reach of the dogs. "Wal," he said with a grin, "w'at you do to poor Flash?"

Brock described the fight with the wolf.

"So dat pup kill de ole wolf, eh? Eet tak' good dog to do dat. W'en you not come home one sleep back, I t'ink you hurt, mebbe."

"I knew you would show up looking for me," replied Brock, his eyes lighting with affection for his partner, "but Flash was too sore to travel, and I was afraid of wolves finding him here or I would

have come back for grub. Where did you get the deer?"

"On muskeg, little piece from here."

"And I travelled twenty miles to-day and never got a shot."

"Dat ees de way wid deer; you nevaire tell w'ere you get dem."

Eating a hearty supper, the boys sat by the hot fire of birch while Gaspard smoked a pipe of company nigger-head. After a silence, the half-breed blew a cloud of smoke from his mouth and said: "I see ver' strange t'ing one sleep back."

"What was it?"

Gaspard pulled for a space before replying, then answered: "I cross trail of two wolf."

"What was strange in that?" queried Brock.

"One wolf had onlee t'ree toe on left hind foot."

"Caught in trap, sometime, but whose trap?" Brock was interested.

"Dat wolf was a dog," announced the other, quietly.

"A dog? What makes you think so, Gaspard?"

"Because my fader had a dog who mak' a track lak dat — wid her left hind foot."

"Your father" — Brock gazed intently into the somber features of his friend. "You say your father had a dog shy a toe? Gee, that's strange!"

The mention of Gaspard's father and the dog turned Brock's mind to the tracks they had seen in September on the lake shore — the likelihood of there being hunters wintering to the north of them. "But how could she be travelling with a wolf? The wolves would kill her, of course," he demurred.

"No, I have hear ov such t'ing."

"You mean she might have mated with a wolf?"

"Ah-hah!"

"And you're sure it was her track?"

"I would know eet anyw'ere."

Brock thrilled to the possibilities of the situation. A dog of the lost Pierre Lecroix — alive in the headwater country! "Then your father must have been right here — last winter?" he said, excitedly.

Slowly the half-breed rose, and dropping his mitten on the thong which held it to the neck of his caribou-skin capote, drew his skinning knife from his sash. Dramatically thrusting the hand gripping the knife above his head, he spoke, as if taking an oath, while the younger youth sat wide-eyed:

"Eef dese men are een dis countree, before de snow fade een April, I weel mak dem tell me how he died."

The fixed purpose, the bitter hatred, in the face

of his friend, as the firelight touched his knotted features, filled the youth who watched with awe. Brock knew that Gaspard Lecroix would never start on the trail home without easing his mind as to the fate of his father. It certainly looked like an exciting winter if these people were north of the big lake. It might be that Gaspard and Brock McCain, also, would leave their bones in the Yellow-Leg country. Involuntarily, Brock shivered at the gloomy thought.

"But how are you going to make them tell?" demanded Brock.

For a long space Gaspard's half-shut eyes stared into the fire. Then he said: "Eef I find one alone, on hees trap-line, dere are way to mak' heem talk." And he again drew his skinning knife, and suggestively ran a calloused thumb along its edge.

CHAPTER IX

THE BATTLE IN THE MUSKEG

A FEW days later, Gaspard and Brock, leaving their dogs wired to trees at camp to avoid their yelping, started on a two days' scout through the country to the north of the big lake. Obsessed by the discovery of the dog tracks in the snow, the memory of his father gave Gaspard no rest. And, moreover, for their own safety it was necessary to learn if the men who had made the tracks on the lake shores were still in the country. Now, with snow on the ground, they could cover a wide area in a short space in their search for the webbed trail of the strange trappers.

Circling the upper end of the lake ten miles to the west, for they had no intention of leaving a trail across the white level which could be detected from the ridges to the north, Gaspard and Brock travelled through the back country. But that night as they dug a fire hole in the heart of a spruce swamp and roasted their caribou steak, they were in frank disagreement.

"I don't think there's a soul within a hundred miles to the north of us," argued the skeptical Brock. "We're already ten or fifteen miles north of the lake now. We must have made forty miles to-day and we haven't seen a shoe track."

"Dey are on de lower lak' or the riviere," grunted the stubborn Gaspard. "We fin' dem to-morrow."

"Well, I believe the people who were here in the summer were just passing through."

The half-breed shook his head with finality.

Brock looked hard at his friend. "You really believe they are in the country?"

Gaspard nodded.

"Near enough to stumble on our trail and bother us?"

Gaspard again lowered his head.

"Why?"

"From dat high ridge back dere, to-day, I see smoke."

"Oh, you mean that haze?" Brock McCain's heart beat faster. What he had laughed away that afternoon as the imagination of his friend, now, as they sat walled in by the gloom of the spruce, seemed more worthy of belief as something other than haze. After all, it might have been smoke from a supper fire. "Of course, it could have been smoke, but it looked like haze to me," he compromised.

The small eyes of Lecroix glittered. "Eet was smoke."

As he wound his plaited rabbit-skin robes around him under the brush roof they had built across the sleep-hole to hold the heat of the fire, Brock wondered what the next day would bring forth. If Gaspard proved to be right and they met some of these hunters, what would happen? Would they attack them on sight or attempt to drive them from the country by threats? Or would they appear friendly, only to track them later to their camp and deal with them as they must have dealt with the missing Pierre Lecroix?

Then, as Brock closed his eyes, faintly across the frozen moonlit valley floated the "ouh! ouh! ouh! ouh!" of a patrolling wolf who had found a fresh caribou trail. Like a premonition, a warning of impending calamity, the wolf wail reached the ears of

the boy muffled in his robes. To-morrow! What would to-morrow bring to them? For the first time since leaving Hungry House, he felt a touch of home-sickness — a desire to see his father and mother and the children in the little fur-post at the mouth of the Starving, two hundred lonely white miles to the south. And if anything should happen to him and Gaspard, at the post they would never know until June, when the canoe they waited for failed to return.

But the feeling of isolation, the momentary desire to see the faces of those he loved, soon left the boy who had inherited from a line of hardy, adventurous forbears a superb body and a fighting spirit. From Kapiskau to Starving River there were no better game shots than Gaspard and himself. And the year before, at the Christmas trade, he had seen his wiry friend in a knife fight with a Cree, the bully of the coast. The sinewy Lecroix, with the shiftiness and speed of an ermine slashing the jugular of the terrible horned owl, had, in a flash, gashed the Cree's knife hand, and thus disarmed his heavier opponent. While in sheer strength of arms and back Brock knew that he was already the equal of any Indian trading at the post. No, if these strange hunters should attempt openly to drive the partners from Starving River

out of the country, they had a surprise awaiting them.

With these thoughts Brock McCain fell asleep. In the morning, the two scouts worked over the ridges to the eastward, with the purpose of crossing the outlet of the great lake and so returning to their home camp. By noon, they had put many miles of forest and barren behind them without crossing a trail.

"Well, it hasn't snowed in days. If these people were wintering near here we'd cross a trail somewhere, for sure," announced Brock, convinced, in spite of the smoke-like haze they had seen the day before, that the country was unoccupied.

"Mebbe, but dey are down riviere," insisted the other.

"Gaspard, I don't believe they're in this — what in thunder do you see?" suddenly demanded Brock, as his friend stopped in his tracks, his narrowed eyes fixed on a small jack-pine.

Pointing with mittened hand at the tree, Gaspard quietly said: "Axe work. De trail ees snowed ovair."

"By golly, you're right!" agreed the surprised Brock, shuffling to the pine and inspecting the gouge in the trunk. "Not many weeks old, either."

"Now, w'at you say?" grimly demanded the half-breed.

Brock shook his head. The joke was on him. "Oh, you're right — as usual," he admitted with a twisted smile. "They're here, these people; but they don't seem to hunt near the lake."

Shortly the scouts reached the edge of a wide barren, and in order to learn whether anyone had entered it since the last fall of snow, agreed to separate, and, following the scrub, meet on the farther side.

Putting the skin case of his rifle into his shoulder pack, Brock pumped a shell from the magazine into the barrel of the 30-30, loosened his knife in its sheath on his belt, and started. The winter on the Yellow-Leg was growing exciting. What if he walked into a couple of these strange Indians? What would he do?

Well, he decided, as he crunched along on his snow-shoes over snow dry as sand, the bows crossing each other with a click audible for a hundred yards in the stinging air, he would hail them in Cree, and wait for their next move. But he'd have his right mitten off and his gun cocked!

After a few miles, the thrill in the possibility of meeting the strangers, or of finding their trail, wore off. The croak of a curious Canada jay, inspecting him from a spruce top; the cheep of friendly chickadees; the "Eek! eek!" of surprised ptarmigan, alone greeted him as he travelled. He

crossed and recrossed rabbit trails, the tracks of a stalking fox, the trail of the big-footed lynx. Caribou, bound for a breakfast of reindeer moss on the barren, had passed that morning before dawn, and in their wake a lone timber wolf, seeking a stray fawn or a lagging adult, enfeebled by age and the lack of teeth to chew his food. But no webbed trail of snow-shoes had entered the barren. Gaspard was prejudiced by the death of his father. Because the elder Lecroix had come to grief somewhere in this country, and there were now people wintering to the north, he took it for granted that they had a hand in his disappearance. But it was only a guess — just a guess. Yes, thought Brock, as he propped his gun in a young spruce and knelt on a snow-shoe to tighten a loose heel thong, he and Gaspard would probably never so much as see these strange —

At the sudden click of snow-shoes in his rear, Brock turned his head as a heavy body catapulted into his back hurling him face down in the soft snow. Through his startled brain flashed the thought of Pierre Lecroix, as, gasping for breath, he thrashed desperately with arms and legs, manacled to his snow-shoes, to break the grip which held him from the rear.

Half-buried in the snow, with no purchase of

solid ground beneath him, while he floundered, straining for a grip on the unseen foe on his back, through Brock's dazed brain flashed the realization that his assailant had not knifed him as he leaped — that he was trying to take him alive. Then the blood of the fighting McCains surged through the veins of the desperate boy. No Cree would take him, a McCain, in a hand to hand fight! His groping right hand found the fingers which gripped his belt. Closing on the wrist above them, like the snap of a wolf trap, with a fierce thrust he straightened his thick arm.

"Makkay!" The cry of pain hissed into Brock's ear spurred him on. With a wrench at the wrist he held, he broke the grip on his belt, and with a twist of his body, turned, to catch from the tail of his eye, the swart face of an Indian, grey with pain.

Then, facing his enemy, as they thrashed in the snow, the superb strength of the boy was unleashed. Desperately, now, the wiry Indian fought to hold him. With his legs gripping the other's, the Cree strained to bury his teeth in the corded neck exposed by Brock's torn capote. But the fighting rage of the furious youth, confident in his strength, would not be denied. Slowly he forced the writhing Indian beneath him, then reached grimly for the knife in the sheath at his back — but the sheath was empty.

Lifting his head as the Cree's left hand desperately groped for his throat, Brock drove a smashing upper-cut into the chin of the man beneath him. Again the hard fist crashed into the exposed jaw. With a shiver, the Indian lay limp on the snow. Then, as the joy of triumph surged through him and Brock's heart beat high, he heard the click of snow-shoes.

"All right, Gaspard!" cried Brock, getting to his feet. "He jumped me from behind, but I got him!" Then the heart of the victorious boy suddenly faltered — his smile faded as he faced two advancing strangers, an Indian and a bearded white man.

"Get him!" roared the latter, as he circled around the body of the unconscious Cree to Brock's rear, while the Indian ran straight at the surprised boy, panting from his recent exertion, his startled blue eyes watching his new enemies as he backed away from the circling white man. If only Flash and Yellow-Eye were with him now! Brock threw a wistful glance at his rifle. It was out of reach. He kept edging away, his fists clenched, but with a rush, the Cree closed in to meet a smashing swing which bowled him into the snow. Then the white man reached Brock from the side.

Blocking the blow aimed at his face, Brock hooked fiercely into the jaw of the other as they clinched and rolled in the snow.

Then the son of Andrew McCain proved the stuff of which he was made; then the fighting blood of generations of voyageurs and fur men heated with fury. They might outnumber and beat him in the end but he would show these renegades and assassins what a boy not yet eighteen could do against odds.

Fighting like a demon, Brock blocked with chin jambed on chest, the fingers straining for a grip on his throat, while he wrenched an arm free to drive his fist into the other's jaw. Over and over in the snow they strained and thrashed, feet hopelessly crippled by the snow-shoes, first one, then the other on top. Strong as he was, the bearded stranger could not reach the maddened boy's thick throat, nor turn him on his back.

Again, over the other's shoulder Brock's hard fist hooked into the jaw; once more the fist crashed. Brock felt the grip of his foe's arms weaken, and, with a supreme effort, tore himself free. Again his elbow lifted, but the same instant two knees drove into his back, while the horn handle of a knife smashed into his head.

Twice, three times the Cree hammered the head of the defenceless lad. The knotted face of the man in Brock's arms, blurred — the snow went black; then all consciousness faded.

CHAPTER X

THE PATROL OF THE GREY OWL

Brock opened dazed and puzzled eyes to find himself lying on the snow where he had been knocked unconscious by the knife handle of the Cree who had caught his right swing flush on the jaw, and for a time, groggy, had tardily come to his chief's rescue. The first Indian, whom Brock had left senseless on the snow, having revived, was talking angrily to the white man whose face bore the marks of Brock's fist.

With throbbing head, and brain still dull from the blows of the knife handle, Brock drew himself

to a sitting position. In the increasing cold of the afternoon his bare hands were already blue from frost.

"He's up now!" said the white man, in Cree, then turned to the boy.

"You're lucky, my young fightin' cock, to come to as you did! Louis, here, wanted to put a knife into you. You sure slugged him for fair. Now shake yourself together! We got t'make camp."

Slowly Brock's confused head cleared. Yes, he recalled, he was tightening a heel thong, when they jumped him. He got the first, then the others piled on, hit him from behind on the head. The boy got to his feet and raised his hand to his swollen head. The fingers were without feeling!

Like the shock of ice water the realization of what that meant spurred Brock's fumbling brain. His fingers were freezing! Groping in the snow where he had fought, he found his mittens.

"Come on now, you!" rasped the white man as the Indians started; "You behave or I'll bore you! Walk off lively now; it's late."

Brock was too dejected — too indifferent — to answer.

Rubbing his hands vigorously with snow, then slowly bringing back the blood by putting them inside his shirt beneath his arm-pits, Brock followed

the Crees, one of whom carried his rifle, while the white man brought up the rear.

As the exertion of snow-shoeing in the keen air started the circulation in his numbed limbs, the clearing brain of the boy began to busy itself with his situation. Poor Gaspard! He would never know why his partner had not met him at the far side of the barren. He would wait there, faithful old Gaspard, anxious, wondering.

As usual, Gaspard had been right. It was smoke, not haze, they had seen — smoke from the fire of these people. There was one consolation in it all; they wanted to take him alive. It would have been easy to shoot him from ambush — or knife him. And now, who were they, and what would they do with him? When they made camp, the white leader would show his hand — question him; and, as he had not spoken to the Indians, Brock decided that he would pretend complete ignorance of Cree. He might learn something.

One year back and Pierre Lecroix had been wiped out in the wilderness of the Yellow-Leg. Now it was Brock McCain. As he followed the hurrying Indians back through the timber Brock visioned the faces of his mother and father and the children, sitting at supper, far on the Starving. He swallowed hard on the lump in his throat which rose

at the thought that he might never again sit at that table — never again see the home of his boyhood and those he held dear.

Then, at the exclamation "Kekway!" from the leading Indian, Brock looked up to see the light of a camp-fire in the distance. A third Cree was waiting for their return with a steaming caribou stew and hot tea.

As he ate his supper beside the fire, Brock listened intently to the conversation of the Crees, which largely consisted of ridicule of the man the boy had hammered into unconsciousness, by the other two. And with misgiving, Brock noticed that the Indian with the pounded face often glanced at his conqueror through eyes that glittered with vindictiveness. He would have to watch that Cree, he told himself, for he would never forget.

The white man, on the other hand, whom Brock furtively examined with the hope of learning something to his advantage, seemed to bear the boy no ill feeling for having given him a sore jaw.

From his looks and manner of speaking, Brock decided that the bearded chief of the party was an English Canadian, and after they had eaten, and lit their pipes, while the Crees built up a brush roof as wind-break and to hold the heat of the fire in the snow hole, the white man began his examination of the prisoner.

"So you and your partner thought you'd hunt the Yellow-Leg this winter?"

"Yes," replied Brock, looking the older man squarely in the eye, "it's free country; and I ask you what you mean by jumping me this way, and what you think you're going to do with me? My people will make you pay for this."

The bearded man laughed as he exhaled a cloud of smoke. "My boy," he said, "this ain't free country. It belongs to me and my partners — we were here first. And you Hudson's Bay people have got to keep out — or take the consequences."

"Who are you and your partners?" fiercely demanded Brock. "And when did you become the law in this country?"

The other smiled good-naturedly at the spirit of his prisoner. He seemed to bear no ill will toward Brock, but the boy remembered Pierre Lecroix. "That's tellin'. Who are you, and yours?"

Here the imagination and Scotch shrewdness of Brock gave him an inspiration. "I'm not afraid to tell you," he said sarcastically, "that one of my partners is Etienne Lecroix, of Fort Albany. Ever hear of him?"

At the name of the famous Etienne Lecroix, the white man gave an involuntary start, his eyes widened in surprise, as he repeated this news in Cree to his men.

"Another is Black Jack Desaulles — ever heard of him?" The faces of his auditors, for the curious Crees had joined their chief at the fire, filled Brock with inward delight. They had indeed heard of the chief of the Albany River Patrol of the Provincial Police — dead shot and known from God's Lake to Rupert House as a man without fear. Brock had certainly thrown a bomb into the camp of his captors from the grave looks they exchanged.

"If that's so, my lad; how is it that only two of you bucked the river this fall?" taunted the bearded man, recovering his composure.

But Brock was ready with his answer. "Oh, Etienne and Desaulles came overland from Henley House on the snow. Now I've been frank with you — what d'you want with me?"

The older man puffed for a space on his pipe, evidently digesting the startling information that two of the ablest and most feared men in the Hudson's Bay country were wintering on the Yellow-Leg — Etienne Lecroix, uncle of Gaspard, and head man at Fort Albany, and the famous "Black Jack" Desaulles; and that being so, were there for but one purpose — the solution of the mysterious disappearance of Pierre Lecroix. As Brock secretly revelled in the discomfiture of his captors, he wondered if he had helped rather than injured

his own chances. Then he pricked up his ears as one of the Crees muttered to another in his native tongue as he shook his head doubtfully:

"I tell the big boss last long snows, we do foolish —"

The sharp command of his chief for silence cut the Indian short off, but Brock had heard. The blankness of his expression, however, seemed to satisfy the bearded man that the prisoner knew little Cree, for he said:

"You may be a liar, my lad, and you may tell the truth, but the point is, we got here first and no one's goin' to take this country away from us. Now you proved to-day that you got the stuff in you. With a few more years on your shoulders there ain't many men in this country that'll have any business taking holt of you. How old are yuh?"

Brock grinned as he stretched the truth: "Eighteen."

"Eighteen" — with a nod at Brock, the speaker repeated the answer in Cree to the scowling audience — "eighteen, and you banged up Louis and Joe, there, and fought me like a wolverine. Boy, yuh got a grip like a bear-trap! We got a place for you in our outfit, and a share in the profits, lad. Go easy now — get over your mad; and think it over. There's a heap of fur here . . . for *us*."

Brock was silent as the camp prepared for the night, but think it over he would, he promised himself. Was the man serious, or trying to draw him out? Time would tell. He had his own blanket in his pack, and, when they had tied him up with rawhide, so he could not move easily without disturbing the Indians who lay on either side on the spruce boughs near the fire, he was wrapped in the robe.

Green birch back-logs were piled behind the freshened fire to throw the heat into the hole under the brush where the four men slept on spruce boughs in the snow; and shortly, the wide awake Brock heard their snoring.

With his arms and legs fettered, escape was impossible, so his thoughts ran the gamut of the events of the day which had placed him here, a prisoner — a prisoner, who, like Peirre Lecroix, might never again be heard from. What a jolt the names of Gaspard's uncle and "Black Jack" Desaulles had given them! If only it were true, and these men were back there with Gaspard, to come to his aid. Like wolves they'd take the trail. Like wolves they'd fall on these people. But his partner was alone. What could he do single-handed against four? And there were more of them, of course, for they talked of the old man,

the big boss, somewhere to the north. On the Carcajou, no doubt.

At last, Brock tried to sleep, for he would need his strength, whatever happened. But his bruised head bothered him and his position was uncomfortable. After a time, his tired body brought him to the frontiers of unconsciousness, only to be waked by the call of a grey owl.

He opened his drowsy eyes to watch the glow of the fire on the black screen of surrounding spruce, then closed them with a sigh. Once more he drew near to sleep.

Then again, the hunting call of the grey owl boomed through the soundless forest, "Whoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, whooo-whooo!" On either side of him white man and Indians, heads under blankets, snored regularly. But sleep was not for the boy lying on his back, trussed with raw-hide.

Once more, nearer now, lifted on the stinging air the grey owl's warning to wood mice and snow-shoe rabbits that a winged nemesis drifted over them. Suddenly the regular breathing of Brock McCain checked. Every nerve in his body was alive as he listened with straining ears and pounding heart.

Again the "whoo, hoo — hoo — hoo, whooo — whooo!" was repeated, but this time to be followed by a faint squawk.

The signal! The signal of their boyhood! Gaspard!

So wildly pounded his heart that the excited Brock feared it would wake the men at his side. He had trailed them, Gaspard had gone in search of the partner who failed to meet him at the rendezvous, found the trail and followed. He lay there now out in the snow, warning Brock of his coming. Staunch old Gaspard!

Shortly Brock heard a faint sound behind the snow hole, and he turned his eyes to see a dark head and shoulders, and the glint of steel where the light from the fire touched a knife blade. Cautiously Gaspard worked his way through the hole in the snow he had dug beyond the sleepers' heads, under the roof of boughs.

An Indian mumbled in his sleep at Brock's side, and, in a flash, the knife hung above the blanketed shape — then fell as the snoring again became regular.

Then, locating his friend, Gaspard thrust his face close to Brock's lifted head, and whispered, "Where are you tied?"

"Knees and elbows," replied Brock, under his breath, desperate with impatience and taut nerves.

As Gaspard's arm reached down over his body and the knife slit the cotton jacket of the plaited

rabbit skins, from a blanketed shape came the words, "Black Jack!"

Above the body glittered the poised knife of the crouching Gaspard, five — six — seven — seconds . . .

The white man, dreaming on the lap of death, groaned, then repeated, "Black Jack!" Gaspard lowered his arm.

Again the razor edge of the knife worked to free Brock from the blanket Gaspard did not dare remove because of the nearness of the sleepers. At last, in desperation, Lecroix seized Brock's shoulders and slowly drew him from between his neighbors, and back through the hole in the snow. A slash at his elbow and knees, and Brock was free, with his recovered rifle jammed into his hands.

For a space, the two stood in the snow, guns cocked, ears straining for a sound from the sleep hole. Then, slipping his feet into the thongs of his snow-shoes, Brock whispered, as an arm gripped the shoulders of his partner: "Come on — they're dead asleep!"

The lean features of Gaspard twisted with hate as he replied: "No, we feenish dem now!"

"Wait!" Brock held the arm of his friend. "They didn't shoot or knife me to-day, when they had the chance — they fought me with their hands. We can't do this — after that!"

Lecroix scowled. His black eyes narrowed as he met his friend's pleading look. Then, with a nod, he agreed: "We go."

And, like the feathered patrols of the forest night, the two drifted silently from the sleeping camp.

CHAPTER XI

A COUNCIL OF WAR

THROUGH the blue silence of the thick spruce, over barrens, lit by frozen, low-swinging stars, two dark shapes followed the north shore of the great lake, avoiding the easy and direct route back to their camp, which would leave a tell-tale trail over the snow-blanketed ice, visible by day for a great distance. Their tracks to the foot of the lake could be easily followed, until the first fall of snow, but

Gaspard was heading for a bald ridge on the opposite shore, the wind-brushed ledges of whose shoulders for miles carried no snow. There, following the rock and frozen tundra on moccasins, their trail would be hopelessly lost.

As a bitter dawn slashed the eastern horizon with blue and grey, and the stars faded, Gaspard and Brock crossed the ice of the outlet and built a fire in a cedar swamp, to boil their tea, eat, and rest.

"Why do you think they tried to take me alive?" queried the hungry Brock, alternately munching at a huge piece of cold bannock and a cut of caribou steak, between gulps of hot tea, when he had given Gaspard the full details of the fight and capture. "By Golly, I'm lucky not to be stiff in the snow this minute full of knife jabs."

"Ah-hah! Eet ees ver' strange," agreed his friend. "But you mak' mistake to stop me last night. Four of dem — I fix dem all wid de knife. Now dey hunt us tru de long snow."

"I'm not so sure of that. From the way they opened their eyes when I told them that your uncle Etienne and Black Jack Desaulles were here, I'll bet you they leave the country — think they're being hunted themselves. They don't want to meet that pair."

"Wal, dey will be hunted," said Gaspard, grimly.

"One of dem will tell me w'at he know about my fader — before de goose fly nord."

"I'm with you, partner! The bumps on my old head yell for revenge. I'm with you to the finish. I've told you once, and I tell you again, that I'll never forget what you did for me last night. When I heard that old signal of ours, I thought my heart would jump clear out of my mouth. You're a sure enough partner. Before we leave this country we'll do some tall hunting on our own account, eh?"

Gaspard smiled as he surveyed the big frame of the hungry boy who was finishing the last of the grub brought in the pack.

"De way you eat, Brock," he laughed, "you grow beeg man for fair in little piece. You beat one Cree now; soon you beat two, eh?"

Brock was proud of his strength. He was proud of the way he had overpowered the Cree who had taken him at so great a disadvantage, and he knew that he was more than holding his own with the white man when he was knocked out.

"I think I've grown a bit stouter, Gaspard," he admitted. "Why that fellow with the beard couldn't hold me at all. He tried to choke me but I broke his grip twice and had him where I wanted him, when I got cracked in the head."

"You keep your eye open aftair dis," continued Lecroix, soberly. "Eef dey shoot at you and miss, mak' dem t'ink you are hit. Fall down and wait wid your gun cocked for dem to look for you."

"Oh, I've learned my lesson. To think of that Indian getting so close without my knowing it."

As the sun turned the white lake below them into a sheet of flame, the partners followed the rock outcroppings of the long ridge which wiped out their trail and baffled any immediate pursuit. In the middle of the forenoon, four hungry and delighted huskies welcomed them home.

"Flash, old man," said Brock, holding between his two hands the heavy jowls of his grinning puppy, whose massive white fore-paws beat Brock's chest as he whimpered his joy. "If you'd only been with Brock, Flash, we'd have shown 'em. Gee, boy! but I'd like to see those ivories of yours snap on some of that crowd. You'd slash 'em to ribbons, old fighter, wouldn't yuh? Wouldn't let 'em hurt Brock would yuh? I guess not!"

Hairy throat swelling in mock ferocity, slant brown eyes watching his master's smiling face, wrinkled nose baring his tusks, Flash seized Brock's arm and swung his head from side to side. It was the puppy's plea for a frolic.

"Oh, you want trouble, do yuh?" laughed the

boy. "Think you can lick me this morning because I've been walking all night? All right, we'll see!"

Freeing the pleading dog from the heavy wire leash which confined him to the spruce, Brock followed the yelping puppy out where the snow was untrampled and already two feet deep. There started a rough and tumble between boy and dog which a stranger would have mistaken for a battle to the death. For the powerful husky and the iron muscled lad gave each other little quarter. Circling around him for an opening, then furiously leaping at Brock, the white fangs of Flash snapped again and again as the boy shot out a hand for a leg hold, or pummeled the hairy chest and head with his clenched fist. Then, locked like wrestlers, they rolled over and over in the snow, dry as flour, the puppy roaring in mimic rage as he writhed and twisted in the strong arms of the boy — his jaws snapping at arm and leg and throat — snapping, but always missing their mark; starting to close, but never locking. Then tearing loose, Flash would churn the powdery snow as he worked off his pent energy circling his shouting master, until, with a leap, his hot tongue reached the face of Brock who stood with open arms for the bear hug which ended the game.

"No more of dat, after dis!" warned Gaspard, as the boy took the dog to his tree, while the rest of the team voiced in chorus their resentment at such partiality. "You mak' too much noise. Dey could hear it long piece from here."

"You're right," agreed Brock. "Hear that, Flashie? Next time you think you can lick Brock, you will have to perform in the back country. Poor Yellow-Eye! It makes him crazy!" continued the boy, going to the plunging leader of the team and rubbing his pricked ears. "You'd like to get into that, wouldn't you? There'd be a sure-enough battle in this camp, with you two loose. Did yuh think Flash was eating Brock up?"

The great yellow and white dog whimpered to be set free, for he, too, often romped with Brock, but he could not be trusted as the boy trusted the puppy he had raised with his own hands. Once thoroughly excited, the wolf strain in Yellow-Eye always came to the fore, and fear of the great dogwhip of plaited raw-hide, alone, could calm him. Playing with Yellow-Eye, Brock never left his feet to roll carelessly in the snow, for the untamed wolf blood in the husky, might, at the sight, become inflamed and overwhelm him, and the long fangs instinctively snap at the throat of the man who fed him, but who, when the husky's brain was cool, possessed his absolute loyalty.

Kona and Slit-Ear, older dogs, cared less for the give and take of the rough frolics in the snow which Flash adored, so were seldom indulged.

"Now we've got some fur to trap, Gaspard," said Brock as the partners took council for the future. "You and I are each in debt at Hungry House about four hundred dollars, and we've got our hearts set on owning a first-class outfit, haven't we?"

Gaspard nodded as he smoked.

"Well," continued Brock, "my idea is to concentrate on fur until the January blizzards, while it's prime. After that, if we've had good luck, and these people let us alone, we can start, when the sledding is better and the snow packed, looking for them. What do you say?"

Gaspard's black brows contracted in a frown. "Dey nevaire keep away so long tam."

"I don't know. Their headquarters are a long way back; we know they have no line of traps near the lake. I believe I scared them to death when I told about Black Jack and your uncle, and they've got to go back for new rifles, anyway. My idea is that they'll not show up in this country until they're ordered back by their boss, with reinforcements."

The shoulders of Lecroix lifted in a shrug.

"Mebbe; but dese people come and look for trail, for sure. Some day dey work sout' of de lak' and walk into camp."

"Well, we can't help that," admitted Brock. "They're bound to cross our trap-line trails if they come far enough, and the snow holds off. If they find the camp while we're away, they'll shoot the dogs and wait for us. How can we avoid it?"

For a space Gaspard puffed at his pipe in silence, his lean, dark face wrinkled in thought. Then he said: "We mak' new cache for half de grub, first t'ing — back een dat swamp on de head of dis brook, and keep away from it so de snow show no trail. Den we alway travel wid a dog and sen' heem ahead w'en we come back to camp. Dey got to shoot huskie or he smell dem and holler. Dat weel save us from ambush."

"That's a crackin' idea, Gaspard!" cried Brock, then his eyes shifted to the great slate-grey puppy lying in the snow. "If they shoot that feller over there, though," he nodded at his dog, "they've got to get me too, haven't they, pup?"

The husky rose from his bed, his oblique eyes intently watching the speaker.

"But how shall we leave the other dogs? Loose? They'd hunt, of course — wouldn't be around, probably, so that wouldn't help any."

"No, we leave dem tied on weak raw-hide. Dat hold dem, but eef dey smell Cree dey go wild an' break eet. We hide dem een de scrub spruce each side de camp."

"Yes, that might scare one or two men off; of course, if they didn't scare, they might shoot the dogs and lay for us."

"Ah-hah! But our dog would smell dem, dead dog, also, and warn us before we hit de ambush."

"It's the best we can do — unless we quit the country."

Gaspard knocked out his pipe on a fire-log and rose. "You goin' leeve dis countree, Brock?" he asked, the wraith of a smile curling his stiff lips.

"By the great, horned owl and all his descendants — no!" And sucking a long breath into his deep chest, Brock rose and clapped his friend on the back. "I'm goin' to help you find out about your father partner, you know that?"

"Ah-hah! I t'ot so!" The eyes of Gaspard pictured his gratitude.

CHAPTER XII

THE SILENT WITNESS IN THE SNOW

As their traps needed their attention, the boys lost no time in sledding half their meat and fish and all their fur and emergency outfit, to the hidden cache in the thick spruce swamp at the head of the stream. There it would be safe, after the next snow had wiped out their trail. As usual, they peeled the spruce uprights of the platform, to render them slippery, and circled them with large inverted fish-hooks to baffle climbing wolverines. Then with Kona and Yellow-Eye hidden in scrub on either side of, and a hundred yards from, the camp, the trappers hitched the other dogs to their hand-sleds and started south.

Before dawn, when Brock rolled out of his robes to start the tent stove, he had stared in surprise at the empty blankets of his partner. But by the time

breakfast was ready, a dark face thrust though the double flaps of the tent.

"Come an' see how you lak' somet'ing out here," said the half-breed with a grin.

"What you been up to?"

Gaspard led his partner a short distance in the direction of the lake, then stopped beside a fresh trail.

"When did you make this?" demanded the perplexed boy. "This trail wasn't here yesterday."

"Ah-hah, dis trail run quite a piece — I mak' eet."

"Why, so they can walk into our camp?"

"Yes. Dat ees eet; so dey walk right into . . . dis t'ing."

"Well, I'll be skinned — the bear trap! Gaspard, you're a genius!" cried the delighted Brock.

"Eef dey work dis far back de lak' dey hit my trail and — find de camp and de bear trap. Den he go click!"

"But wait a minute! It won't catch a foot on a snow-shoe — might even push the shoe away as it sprung."

Gaspard smiled at Brock's objection. "Dey weel nevaire come dis far on snow-shoe. I blaze de spruce back a piece to warn dem. Dey weel fear de shoe make noise, so weel carry dem, so close to camp."

"I guess you're right. It may not work, but it's a great idea, anyway."

So, with a heavy sapling as a lever, the boys pried down the trap spring and set the terrible, toothed jaws agape, under a covering of light snow on which they left the webbed print of a shoe, and lightly swept it with a raven's wing to make it appear natural. The foot which stepped on that engine of steel was doomed to freeze stiff in a matter of minutes.

Then, after a meal of frozen white-fish, they tied Kona and Yellow-Eye in their hiding places of young spruce, and left on the fifty mile circuit of their trap-lines.

Later in the day, as Gaspard was following a line of mink and otter traps, he stopped on the wind-brushed ice of a long dead water for a short rest and a smoke. Anxious as he was to make a good hunt of fur which would be bartered at Hungry House against his present debt and for food and supplies for the following winter, there were few hours in his busy days when his thoughts did not return to the father he had lost. A year had not yet passed since some of these white valleys in the headwater country of the Yellow-Leg had echoed to the yelps of the dogs of Pierre Lecroix; some of these lakes had been marked by the sled trail of the wanderer.

Since Gaspard had crossed the tell-tale footprints in the snow — the familiar trail of his father's dog with the mutilated foot, travelling with a wolf — he had needed no further proof that Pierre Lecroix had reached this lake country for which he had started.

The men who had attacked Brock could tell why his father did not return the previous March to those who had waited in vain for the yelps of his team at the Starving River camp. Why had he weakened, he asked himself, when Brock had held him back from knifing these men where they lay? They had shown Pierre Lecroix no mercy; murdered him in his sleep or shot him from ambush; given him no chance, for otherwise the rifle and knife of Pierre Lecroix would have taken bloody toll. Wiped out in his prime by these cut-throats from the north who had taken free country for their own! Left in the snow somewhere in these hills, for the foxes and ravens to gnaw and pick — Pierre Lecroix, the father he had loved.

So ran the bitter thoughts of the youth as he smoked. Then, his eyes casually following the opposite shore of the stream, suddenly lit with interest. From the ribbon of alders and willows edging the ice, the shore lifted to a stand of spruce scrub. On the rim of a small opening in the spruce,

the keen eyes of Gaspard stared curiously at some stumps cut by an axe.

"By gar!" he muttered, as Slit-Ear rose, shook himself and, ears pricked, also looked across the stream.

Followed by the dog, drawing the light sled, Gaspard walked rapidly toward the objects of his curiosity. Some one had camped here, and in the winter, for the stumps stood well above snow level. There being no birch or poplar, the camper had cut spruce for his fire. The color and condition of the butts of the stumps — for the surface was sound and, as yet, not aged by the weather — proved that the cutting had been done within a year or two. The thought that his father might have camped here the winter previous, aroused the boy to strenuous action.

Slipping his feet from the thongs of his shoes, and using a shoe as a shovel, he began to clear the opening in the spruce of the two feet of snow which covered it. He had labored for a half hour when suddenly the toe of his shoe scraped into a charred stick.

In a few minutes, Gaspard's shoe had exposed the blackened debris of an old fire. Continuing, the excited youth widened the area of cleared ground. Then the bow of his impromptu shovel

struck something which he knew was neither ice nor frozen soil. His heart beat hard as he scraped away the snow from what lay beneath.

"Ah-hah!" At the exclamation his hot breath left his mouth like a puff of smoke, as it froze in the keen air. "De tent!"

Scraping the snow like a madman from the stiff fabric beneath it, while the interested Slit-Ear sniffed and whined, scratching industriously at his side at the mysterious, hidden thing, Gaspard uncovered the rotted canvas of a small shed-tent, frozen to the ground.

But shed-tents are common in the north, and there was nothing to identify this as the one Pierre Lecroix took with him into the Yellow-Leg country. Gaspard turned to the sniffing dog. "Too long tam — too much rain fall on dis tent for you to smell anyt'ing, eh Slit-Ear?"

But the husky was keenly interested in the object from which they had scraped the snow. As Gaspard tore the canvas from the frozen earth, searching every inch for some mark of identification, the dog, spurred on by the mysterious actions of the man, began to scratch furiously at the frozen ground, stopping to take long whiffs as he worked.

"W'at you got dere, Slit-Ear?" demanded Gaspard, for he knew how keen were the nostrils of a husky.

Desperately the dog scratched, but the hard surface defied his nails. Then, getting his axe from the sled, Gaspard chipped away the ice, frozen leaves and sticks from a — bone. Familiar as had been death and tragedy in the life of the youth; hardened as the bitter struggle renders those who wring a lean living from the grim solitudes of the northern forests; Gaspard choked with emotion as his shaking fingers brushed the broken ice and debris from his discovery.

Could this have been the last camp of the father he sought? This bone here — grim evidence of the miserable death of Pierre Lecroix in his tent in the snow? He pushed the dog away and turned sadly from the half-buried bone to dig beyond it for what the gnawing wood-folk had left.

If only he could find some article of Lecroix' outfit to make sure! If they had killed him here in his sleep, they would have taken his blankets, gun and knife, but not all. Where was his cooking kit — his clothes? He had worn a leather belt with a large brass buckle. So, widening the shovelled area, Gaspard dug with knife and axe, while Slit-Ear industriously sniffed here and there. At length, the labor of the boy was rewarded with a small frying pan.

Nodding his hooded head Gaspard identified

the utensil he held in his hands. There in the handle, was a familiar dent. Then, in his grief, he turned to the half-buried bone. Reverently he chipped at the frozen soil in which it lay imbedded, when, suddenly, the axe fell from his hands.

"By gar! Shin-bone of caribou!" he cried in his joy. "See dat, you Slit-Ear! He ees not here! Everyw'ere we dig about dis tent but dis is all we fin'." The swart face of Gaspard darkened in his fur hood. "No, he ees not here — but dey get heem — yes, dey get heem — somew'ere!"

And yet, the heart of Gaspard Lecroix, as he followed his traps through the day, over the wind-brushed hills and through the blue silence of the spruce and along the frozen shells of the streams, beat, he knew not why, with a faint thrill of hope. The camp of his father had not given up its dead.

CHAPTER XIII

HE LAUGHS BEST WHO LAUGHS LAST

DECEMBER came and the long snows slowly tightened their grip on forest and muskeg; December with its withering northers off the ice-fields of the great bay pounding the Kiwedin valleys with barrages of needle-pointed snow which no men or dogs might face; December, with its short days of a few hours of light and its nights fantastic with "The Dance of the Spirits," as the Crees called the pearl, rose and blue lights which pulsed and quivered on the northern horizon, to send ribbons of haze writhing across the glittering stars; December, with its late and bitter dawns, breaking across

the east, while the spruce snapped with the frost and the riven ice of the lakes boomed its muffled salute to the coming day.

And now that Flash had become harness wise and amenable to the laws of trace and trail, Brock sometimes hitched him as rear dog in the team and, with Yellow-Eye in the lead and Kona between them, drove them over his line of traps while Gaspard used Slit-Ear. For the raw Flash needed the training with the team. At night, on the end of his line, Brock wired his puppy and the big leader to separate trees, where they dug beds in the snow, and, owing to their double coats and natural hardiness, slept without frost-bite in temperatures which would freeze dogs less tough and inured to cold.

Already the growing Flash had reached the height and bulk of the doughty king-dog of the Hungry House huskies, and Brock instinctively shivered at the thought of what a battle between the two great beasts would mean. Although, while resting in harness, Yellow-Eye often swung around to inspect the puppy who had joined the team, and the mutual stiffening of tails and manes as the slant, yellow eyes of the leader met the challenging brown gaze of the great slate-grey and white rear dog, a word from Brock and a snap of the raw-hide

whip, would send the old king to his place. But the boy knew that, loose and alone, beyond reach of his voice and control, the two would clash in a battle for supremacy. For the puppy, although not as yet full grown, would never again allow the king-dog to assert his sovereignty, as of old, but would battle for his independence of all control around the camp, as he had fought the timber wolf.

But what wild rides the three dogs gave him over the ice of the back country lakes when new snow had not softened the hardened trails to his traps! In full cry, like timber wolves after caribou, the team swept past the black spruce of the shores as the hooded face of Brock McCain reddened under the bite of the wind and his frozen breath trailed off behind like smoke. It was on these trips to the south over his lines that Brock forgot the menace which hung over him and Gaspard — wiped from his brain the thought that, some day, he might return to find the tent burned and the snow trampled by the shoes of the strangers, and Gaspard killed or captured.

Never did either partner approach the camp without great caution, whether the dogs had been left as a guard or taken to the traps. With enemies such as they had met, wintering to the north, and the memory of Pierre Lecroix constantly in

their minds, their life when at camp was one of constant vigilance.

Then, after two weeks of constant toil, which had netted the wily Gaspard many a prime, black mink and otter pelt, three lynx, a fisher, and to the delight of both trappers, the first silver-grey fox of the winter, the half-breed announced as they sat in the snug tent heated by the roaring stove, one evening over their supper: "To-morrow I take a beeg swing ovair nord. I want to look for trail since de las' snow."

"You don't want me to go, too?" frowned the disappointed Brock.

"No, I weel travel hard an' camp at de outlet."

"You don't want to be slowed down by your partner, I see," said Brock. "Well, I'm faster than I was last winter — seem to have more endurance; but you can beat me a mile in ten and I know it."

The half-breed smiled. "You are too stout built, Brock, an' heavy. Nex' winter you use bigger shoe. You grow ver' fas' now. W'en you grow up, you beat me."

"Beat you?" cried the white boy. "Don't make me laugh. You're the best runner on this coast. But I hate to have you tackle it alone. If they ambushed you, what would I do?"

"Wait two-t'ree day, den tak' de dog an' start for home."

Brock's round face flamed with anger. "You think I'd do that?" he demanded. "You think I wouldn't hunt for you as you did for me, and try to get the people who had jumped my partner?"

Gaspard's lean face softened as he shrugged his shoulders. "You are young, Brock, and have familee," he objected. "I have no one left now, no fader, no moder."

"But you have young brothers."

"Dey are safe wid my uncle."

"You promise you won't do anything wild? I want to be with you when we meet these people again — and I want Flash and Yellow-Eye. Golly! I'd like to send those dogs into that gang — what?"

So, as Gaspard insisted that he wished to travel at his limit through a wide circle north of the great lake to learn what the snow might tell, and the square-built and heavy Brock would only slow him down, his partner reluctantly consented.

The late December dawn of the following morning discovered a wiry half-breed, caribou capote sashed tightly to his body, swinging tirelessly over the snow, as he approached the upper end of the big lake. Bobbing up and down as he strode, and slung from the sash, hung a long skinning knife in its leather sheath. One mittened hand of the traveler carried his rifle, cased in skin to protect

bore and action from snow. Around the middle of the rifle barrel where the naked steel, in extreme cold, would suck the skin from the bare fingers of the left hand, was wound a thin strip of raw-hide. In the same manner, the trigger-guard and lever handle were wound to protect the right hand.

By the middle of the morning, the man on snow-shoes was well to the north of the lake. Always as he travelled, he held to the thick timber. Twice, he climbed to the bald brows of hills to study the white shells of lakes and ponds which lay among the ridges to the north. As he circled to the east down the north shore of the lake, but far inland, his snow-shoes crossed many game trails. Here caribou had plunged through the deep snow, there lynx and fox and rabbit had moved on their respective ways. Once he passed the scooped-out trail of a short legged otter, crossing a ridge to new hunting water; again, the scattered feathers and crimsoned snow where owl had met ptarmigan; elsewhere, a grey wolf had floundered through soft snow on the hopeless trail of a fox who ran lightly on the surface. Everywhere on the white map of the forest floor was written the history of the nights since the last fall of snow. But the evidence which the roving eyes of the hunter sought, the map failed to record — the webbed trail of man.

On he travelled through the short hours of the day until he neared the lower end of the lake and turned south to cross the outlet. Whatever the early December snows might conceal, it was evident that no one had approached the lake from the north in the last week. Then, as the hunter headed south for the outlet through the spruce already darkening with shadow, a rifle roared in the silent forest. Stumbling forward, the ambushed hunter stopped, swayed for an instant on his feet, both hands clutching his gun, then reeling, fell to the snow. Again the silence of the spruce, shot with the shadows of the creeping night, lay unbroken. With a croak, a lumber-jack flapped curiously down to inspect from a distance the still shape in the snow. A grey owl, disturbed where he waited for dusk in the thick crown of an old spruce, drifted away like a wraith. A frightened snow-shoe rabbit, palsied with terror, trembled in a neighboring thicket. But the figure in the snow did not move.

Minutes passed. Then the profound stillness was marred by the muffled fall of snow from a young spruce twenty yards from the dark shape which lay as in the sleep of death. From behind the spruce two bead-like eyes in a hooded face furtively watched the thing in the snow. Shortly, a hunched figure stole swiftly from the tree. Within three

yards of the body in the snow, the stalker stopped abruptly, to finger the action of his gun as he peered sharply at his victim. Satisfied, he moved forward, and with a grunt kicked the body on the snow with the bow of his shoe.

At the movement, sinewy fingers clamped like a vise on the shoe, jerking it forward. The knees of the man pulled off balance, were struck by a lunging body, and the Indian toppled with a shriek of terror, as the cat-like Gaspard fell on him.

Then, an arm lifted and fell, lifted and fell. The stillness of the dusk-filled spruce was startled by a stifled cry — a gasp. Again the arm rose and fell.

Silence returned to the gloom of the forest.

Gaspard Lecroix rose from the body of the Indian, sinewy fingers still gripping his knife, to listen. Then he turned to the man who had fired on him from ambush. The Indian was dead.

"You shoot me from de bush, eh?" the infuriated Lecroix muttered, as he cleaned the knife-blade with snow and picked up his gun and mittens. "I teach you man-killers some trick before de snow melt."

Then, as he stood for an instant, looking down on the grey face distorted in death, sorry that he had not taken the Cree prisoner to learn the fate of his father, something wet ran down his cheek.

Slipping his hand from its mitten, Gaspard touched his face to find his fingers smeared with blood.

"Ah-hah!" he muttered, following the furrow across his cheek. "He come ver' close sendin' Brock home widout hees partner." Then the boy hurried on through the gathering dusk to the outlet and the camp-ground in the swamp where he had left cut wood for a fire.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CARIBOU DRIFT SOUTH

The following night, Brock and Flash returned from the traps to find Gaspard with supper waiting.

"Kekway!" he shouted in the manner of the Crees as he thrust his head through the tent flaps. Then seeing the broken skin of Gaspard's cheek, asked in excitement, "Where did yuh get that?"

Gaspard smiled a one-sided grimace. "Oh, I got dat from a fr'en' ov you."

"You ran into 'em? Got shot at?" demanded the aroused youth. "What're yuh holding back on me? Hurry up!"

Gaspard related the details of the ambush and

his stratagem in luring the would-be assassin to his deserved doom.

"Old pard!" cried the white boy, seizing his friend with the hug of a bear. "I'm sure proud of you! Before this winter is over we'll show these murderers they can't run us out of this country. But I don't know how you kept from taking a shot at him as he came up."

"My gun was not cocked. Eef I shoot, he hear dat click first and jump behin' a tree. Eet was safer wid de knife."

"Yes, if you didn't miss when you grabbed at his shoe. But then, you wouldn't miss, with those talons of yours. Won't their eyes stick out when I tell them at Hungry House?"

Gaspard's dark features set like stone. "We not too sure to see Hungree House, Brock. Dese people are on de hunt for us. Dat Cree follow my trail, for sure, and den cut ahead to shoot me."

"Well, if it snows every few days, they may not find the camp for weeks, and remember, they think Black Jack and Etienne are hunting them. That keeps 'em worried, and will keep 'em north of the lake, too."

The following morning Brock and Flash started for the end of Brock's trap-lines. On his last trip he had made a discovery. From a barren hill be-

yond the last of his fisher and marten cabane traps, which ran along a timbered ridge, Brock had studied the country to the south-west through the small field-glasses loaned him by his father. Reaching away as it did in a vast barren to dim blue hills marking the horizon, it had all the earmarks of an excellent winter feeding ground for caribou. But never, until his last trip to the outlying camp, had Brock's glasses revealed more than a small band or two, consisting of four or five animals, in all the broad miles that he watched. But two days before, on ascending the hill and swinging the binoculars across the nearest reaches of the white plain, he had gasped at what he saw.

For miles, the white barren was dotted with blue-grey shapes of feeding caribou. Evidently a winter migration, of which he had often heard, was on. From the wind-pounded wilderness of north-western Kiwedin they had drifted south, seeking the cover of the forests where the spruce and tamarack swamps hung with pale green moss, called by the Crees "Old Man's Beard," and where, under the snow of the muskegs, lay the white reindeer moss. To the south, within reach of their camp, he had found a winter rendezvous of barren-ground caribou. He would bring Gaspard and the team, and they would store a supply of frozen meat against

the lean days of the spring when their supplies would run low.

But Gaspard's traps needed attention, and Brock had decided to return and hunt alone for two days, then go back for his partner.

It had not snowed for a week, and over the trail, packed hard by much use, in the timber, wind-brushed and pounded, on the ice of stream and lake, the powerful Flash romped with the light sled. Ears up, red tongue out, curled tail waving above his back like a banner, the massive husky galloped up the river-ice, then broke into his pacing gait as he climbed the first rise, refusing to walk on a day when the stinging air off the timbered ridges drove the blood tingling through his veins.

Not stopping to visit the traps he had reset and baited the previous day, Brock stayed on the sled, singing in sheer joy of living, until the trail dipped to a sizable lake; then, rolling off, he followed at a trot, on his smoke-tanned moccasins which firmly gripped the ice-hard surface. As his load lightened, with a yelp the dog turned his slate-grey head, red mouth agape in a huge grin, while the slant eyes flashed roguishly at the master who followed. Then straightening out, Flash fled up the lake trail, with the swinging sled at his heels.

"Hey, you Flash! Whoa, there, Flash!" shouted

the boy at his fleeing dog. But Flash was not to be denied his joke. Too often he had slaved in the deep snow with the sled that now slid over the lake trail like a feather. The freezing air was in his blood. It was fun, this game. So, like a mischievous boy, he ran away from his less fleet master; then, at the end of a mile, he stopped and waited.

"What d'yuh mean, you rascal — running away from Brock?" cried the panting youth when he reached the runaway. "I've a good mind to give you a taste of the whip — only I left it in camp."

His bushy tail brushing the snow as he sat, the panting dog grinned a wide-jawed, red-mouthed grin at the man he loved.

"Run away, would you? You slit-eyed, laughing son-of-a-wolf!" And Brock McCain opened his arms and, circling the huge shoulders of his dog, swayed from side to side as he knelt on the snow, while Flash's moist nose sought to reach the face in the hood rimmed with hoar-frost.

So they played through the morning, dog and boy, on their way to the camp beside the caribou barrens.

Dawn found Brock waiting in the scrub on the edge of the barren for light enough to begin his stalk of the nearest deer, for caribou are restless and often feed early and move back into the timber with the sun.

Constantly walking back and forth to keep the blood circulating, for the morning was a bitter one, Brock swung his arms and stamped his snow-shoes, while the eastern sky lightened. Slowly the bank of gloom which walled off the muskeg from the eyes of the shivering hunter, greyed as the dawn broke. As the dusk lifted and the white floor of the barren was vaguely revealed to his peering eyes, he saw moving shapes, like shadows, drift from the scrub, to be swallowed up in the grey murk of the distance.

"Wolves!" he muttered. "And they'll run the deer out of the country! Well, I'll pay them for spoiling my hunting his morning — I'll hunt *them*." Then he thought of the dog he had left at the camp wired to a tree, because Flash would interfere with his stalk. What if the wolves that had followed the caribou migration south should run into Flash?

"I'll never leave that pup alone again in this country," ruefully muttered the alarmed boy.

The light strengthened and shortly the first rays of the sun filtered like fingers of fire across the white plain reaching endlessly before him. But the wolves had done their work. Not a caribou was in sight. Focusing his glasses, Brock made out, miles away, some grey objects moving rapidly on the barren.

"There they are!" he muttered. "Scattered the deer to the four winds. Well, I'm going to get Flash, and see what the country looks like over west. I'll probably strike some caribou, too, and I'm hungry for fresh meat."

Returning to his camp, Brock hitched Flash to the sled, on which he loaded his blankets, a shed tent and what provisions he had, and started south-west on his wolf and caribou hunt.

Boy and dog were no longer travelling on a trail packed down and hardened by many trips of the sled. Much of the time they were in the soft deep snow of the timber, and although the sled was light, Brock had to break a trail to give footing to his heavy puppy who wallowed to his shoulders in snow that the shoes of Brock had not tramped down.

Throughout the morning, although they crossed the trails left by the splayed, round-toed hoofs of hundreds of travelling caribou, not an animal did Brock see feeding on the barren. Three days before, their blue-grey battalions had drifted into the country, only to vanish like shadows before the sun. Where had they gone?

Then, as the low December sun sank, muffled by a leaden sky, warning the hunter that the swift night was hovering, he saw them. Far off, to the

west, his glasses picked out groups of deer, digging the snow from the moss of the barren. But it was too late.

Turning back into the timber, Brock found a sheltered stand of spruce under a ridge, and cutting fire wood, started his kettle, dug a sleep-hole, lined it with brush, and across one end anchored the canvas with brush.

With Flash between his knees, he waited for the pail to boil.

"You know, old socks," Brock said to the dog whose narrow, oblique eyes looked with worship into the wind-burned face of his master, "we've got to mush back to the big camp to-morrow, or Gaspard will start looking for us." Brock ran his fingers through the thick mane of the husky's neck, which snapped with the electricity which charged the stinging air, as the dog rested his head on the boy's knee.

"You see, Flash, we're two days' travel from home, and if we don't get a shot at the deer early to-morrow, Flash has got to eat fish."

Lifting his nose, the dog whined, his ears cocked, all attention.

"What, you don't want fish? Hear something, eh?"

Springing suddenly from the surprised Brock,

the dog raised his head, while his black nostrils tested the air. Then his great mane rose stiffly on neck and shoulders as his ears flattened.

"Smell game, eh?"

Pointing his nose at the stars the husky roared his defiance of the unknown enemies out there in the gloom of the barren.

"What is it, wolf, old boy?"

Again Flash waked the freezing night with his deep voiced battle cry. Then, faintly, from the barren, drifted the hunting howl of timber wolves.

"No meat for us to-morrow, boy!" said Brock, shaking his head regretfully. "There won't be a caribou within ten miles in the morning."

CHAPTER XV

THE DRUM-BEAT OF THE BLIZZARD

At midnight, when the boy turned out of his robes to freshen the fire, the stars had been wiped from the sky as a sponge wipes clean a slate.

"Snow!" he muttered.

Later when he waked in stygian darkness to consult his watch, he found that it was six o'clock. As his breakfast kettle heated, the snow began to fall, and the wind rose.

"No hunt to-day, Flash; home for us!" announced the boy to the dog who sprang from his hole in the snow to shake himself and stretch.

Then, heads down, into the rising wind, Brock led the way to the end of the trap-line trail. Gradually, as they travelled, Brock breaking trail for his

dog and the sled, the wind gathered velocity, and the pin-pointed snow crystals bit their faces with increasing sting.

"A norther, for sure!" muttered the boy, between his teeth, as he doubled into the drive of the touched wind, followed by the great husky, nose at the heels of Brock's shoes, coat already crusted, slant eyes shut against the torment of the pelting, sand-like crystals.

On they struggled into the teeth of the gale. Although the snow already lay two feet deep on the forest levels, as yet the ice-fields of the Arctic had held in leash the first December blizzard. It was over-due and Brock knew that a grinding day of bucking the wind separated him from the better going on the trap-line trail.

As the light filtered dimly through the curtain of snow, Brock took his bearings from the barren he was leaving. Twenty miles of trail-breaking into the searing wind, to country with which he was familiar — then twenty miles over a trail, drifted to be sure, but blazed, and hard underneath. Strange country was no place in which to wait out a Hudson's Bay norther — strange country, with a day's grub remaining for Flash and himself.

As they toiled on into the pounding wind, sheathed with snow like two white wraiths, the

thoughts of Brock flashed back to the warning of his father: "Many a good man, stronger, older and wiser than you, my lad, has starved out after a big snow — lost!"

"But I'm not lost," he muttered in his teeth, "and once I strike the line, I'll get into camp in a day."

But Brock knew that he was not travelling two miles an hour and would have to stop and make camp while there was light. That meant, if the wind held, he would take another day to reach his lines.

"Come on, Flash!" The dog's crusted muzzle, flicked here and there with frozen blood from the battering of the needle-pointed barrage, nuzzled his legs. "We've got to do better than this!"

Blinded by the shot-like drive which beat into his frost-burned face as he floundered into the wind roaring through the spruce scrub, the indomitable boy battled through another hour, then, turning his back, sat down while he wiped the snow from the closed eyes of the dog who held to his heels.

"No use! We make camp, boy!"

Finding a wind-break of thick growing spruce, the exhausted Brock rubbed the numbness from his hands, and dug a sleep-hole where, after many attempts, he kindled a fire of dried spruce sticks, then across it felled whole trees to feed it.

At last, rested, and warmed by the fire and hot tea, Brock gave the ravenous Flash half the frozen fish he had brought, and made a stew for himself of half the dried caribou. For dog and boy who had floundered all day through drift into the beat of the wind, the half ration of food left stomachs aching in protest. But before them lay many a white mile, shoulder deep with drift, so Brock saved his food.

"Poor old Flash," he crooned into the furry ear of the dog who lay in the fire-hole beside him, under the canvas roof, weighted with boughs and snow. "Pull like a moose, all day up to your shoulders, blind as a bat, and only one fish for supper! Shame, I say!"

For answer, a battered nose snuggled into the armpit of the boy's duffle capote.

Brock scratched the base of the ears behind the massive skull. "We're goin' to be pretty hungry before we see Gaspard. You know that?"

The dog withdrew his head and blinked his inflamed eyes at the frost-blackened face of the boy he worshipped, then his jaw dropped in a red grin, and he took Brock's forearm in his tusks and moved his head from side to side as his throat rumbled.

"Oh, you don't care whether you starve or not, you old rascal, so long's you're with Brock? That

what you say?" And the husky closed his slant eyes in contentment as the arms of the boy circled his neck in a bear hug.

As massed artillery pounds enemy trenches, through the night the norther pounded the Kiwedin wastes. Hour by hour the drifts rose in height on the trail back to the trap-line. Snug in their dens and lairs the furred patrols of the star-lit hours now slept, and in the refuge of the thick timber, snowy and grey and horned owl huddled, for no wood-mouse, rabbit or ptarmigan moved in thickets hammered by the shrieking wind. No creature dared the wrath of the storm.

In the blackness preceding the late dawn, Brock waked cold to find his fire-hole half-buried in drift for the wind had shifted. With numbed fingers he shoveled out the hole and gathering dead twigs from the under side of spruce, finally, peeling bark from a birch, got a fire going while the grey drift swept steadily overhead.

"Three-day blow, Flash!" he greeted the dog, returning from an inspection of the drifts surrounding the thicket. "If we don't want to starve we've got to make tracks to-day."

Finally the water boiled and Brock, allowing himself a small piece of cold bannock, filled his aching stomach with tea.

"Queer the wind should shift!" he mused. "Must be in the north-east now."

By nine o'clock it was light enough to distinguish objects down wind, and Brock started. Had he been well supplied with provisions, he would have weathered the blow in camp, but to wait one — two days, until the norther blew itself out, while he and Flash grew weak from hunger, was not to his liking. While he yet had his strength, he would try for his trapping camp, where there was a little flour and dried meat, and fish for Flash. It could not be far, not more than ten miles, and if the wind eased they might make it that night.

But, as the boy, followed by his dog and the light sled, plunged head down into the white slant of the norther, Brock knew that the savage thrust which held him to a walk, cutting the face like the lash of myriad whips, would, that day, show no mercy. It was a three-day norther, and the knowledge chilled his heart. Ten miles to the end of his line — and grub!

For two hours, the dogged youth, with the nose of his husky at his heels, pushed into the hammering wind. At length, weak from hunger and exhaustion, he crossed a small valley where the drifts rose shoulder-high but the wind-break of the ridge ahead eased the going. He knew he must find a

camping place soon and weather it out, for his legs were stiffening. The grub at the end of the trap-line was still miles away. He couldn't make it. He must hold up for the night and wait for the norther to blow itself out. He couldn't buck this wind loaded with shot. He was beaten.

But there was no cover here. He would freeze if he stayed. They must get over the ridge and down into the thick timber. So the two crouching figures climbed to the bald brow of the divide smothered with snow-swirls.

As Brock reached the open shoulder of the ridge, the white fury struck him like a blow, anchoring him in his tracks as it sucked the breath from his body. Beaten to his knees, gasping for wind, he hung to the collar of the blinded dog, as the white wrath of the Arctic pounding the brow of the hill, roared past.

Here he would freeze! They must go on — on, to the timber! Rapidly numbing face and hands drove him to action. Head down, body doubled on his thighs, again the desperate lad plunged into the pin-pointed barrage which beat the blood, like sand-blasts, to his frost-blackened face.

At his heels crawled a dog.

Through the white maelstrom of the exposed ridge they battled; now flattened to the snow as

wind flattens grass; now reeling forward until, again beaten to their knees, they sought breath for another effort. On and on went the pair, boy and dog, fighting for every white yard they wrung from the bludgeoning wind, as they sought the sanctuary of the spruce. There, at last, they won their way, and, side by side, on the snow gasped for breath as the norther thundered over them.

Rested, Brock wiped the ice from his tortured face with a blue hand. From nose to tip of tail Flash was sheathed with snow. By instinct and the feel of the tails of Brock's shoes, the husky had held to his master's heels. Tenderly the boy freed the inflamed eyes of his dog from the crust which blinded him. Then, where the spruce stood thick and no drift was making, Brock dug a hole, lined and covered it with boughs and cut wood for a fire.

"We'll wait it out here, Flash," he cried. "There's a little left for supper — then — we starve; but we'll wait it out here."

Ravenous with hunger after the hours of grinding toil against the force of the wind, dog and boy finished the pitiful half-ration of food which remained, and curling before the blazing logs, slept the drugged sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PINCH OF HUNGER

To Brock's surpise and joy, he opened his eyes at dawn to find that the blizzard had blown itself out and the snow had ceased.

"Hey, you Flash!" he cried to the dog who had dug into the snow at the side of the hole. "Wake up, you old sleepy head! To-day we have a real feed."

Breakfast is soon prepared when there is nothing but hot snow water for a clamoring stomach. Brock was weak from lack of food but the thought of the meal he and Flash would share at the trap-line camp that day, drove his hunger from his mind. Drinking the water in which he had boiled his tea bag, he tightened his belt over his empty

stomach and started on legs stiff from the exertion of the day before.

It was a changed world through which he travelled that calm, sunny morning. Hollows were filled with drift to the lance-like points of the scrub spruce. Streams and ponds, where the wind had full play, were scoured of snow to the ice, as if swept by a giant broom. In the small barrens, the snow rippled away in drifts to the south like the billows of a white sea.

On the brow of the first ridge he mounted, Brock stopped to set his course. For a long space he gazed to the north and east, then his brows contracted as a puzzled look entered his eyes. He turned to the west, then south over the country he had come.

"By the great horned owl, Flash," he announced to the dog whose eyes watched the boy with interest, "I don't see one darned land-mark!"

Again Brock studied the grey ridges to the north.

"Well, I'm stumped!" he announced. "From here we ought to see the big barren and the long ridge, north of it. It's only a few miles."

Brock got his glasses from the sled and slowly swept the surrounding country. Every hill and conspicuous spruce or jack-pine, every ice-locked pond, every reach of frozen muskeg, he studied for

some land-mark he had noted on his way south-west along the great barren. But his search was in vain. He was in a country he had never seen.

Somehow he had been tricked by the wind. It had shifted and he had followed the shift. He had probably worked far to the east, but not more than ten miles. He hadn't made much more than that against that wind. So he turned into the north-west.

Through the short hours of the sub-arctic December day, they travelled over the fresh blanket of snow which had buried the country. But when the sun drifted into the lead-colored haze, smearing the western horizon, and Brock made camp, the wind-burned features of the boy's face, scarred by the whip of the blizzard, were sober with doubt. He had worked many miles into the north-west and yet had seen no familiar country. That day he should have reached or seen the ridge at the end of his lines and the barren to the south. As the light faded and the spruce filled with purple shadow, Brock now realized that in the two days of blinding snow with a masked sun, he had worked far to the east or west — which he did not know. If to the east, he was now south of the Yellow-Leg river itself, and should turn north-west to reach the lake. But if he were west of his trap-lines, what then?

And the last of the food was gone! How long could he travel without grub? Starving as they were, he and Flash could make the trap-lines and home camp — if he only knew in which direction they lay. But to wander — lost!

Again Brock recalled the warning of his father, "Many a good man, stronger, older and wiser than you, my lad, has starved out after a big snow — lost."

"Well, Flash, I guess dad was right," said the disheartened boy, sitting beside his dog before their supperless fire. "We're lost, boy, lost; and if we don't strike game, we're going to starve. I haven't even seen a runway where I can set a rabbit snare."

The hungry dog voiced the torment of his empty stomach with a low whimper. He rose and nosed the sled, sniffing long at the grub bag which had been scraped of its last crumb.

"You've never had to starve, old boy, like many dogs; always had your fish or meat, or grease and cornbread. And you wonder why there's no supper, don't yuh, pup?"

The oblique eyes of the dog searched his master's face, then the battered nose nuzzled Brock's capote, as if in search of food strangely denied him, while he whined in protest at the ghastly joke.

Supperless, the two friends slept, while out under the glittering stars stole the clawed patrols of the forest night, pitiless eyes scouring thickets and moonlit reaches for that which would still the ache of their hunger. Ghostly shapes, like grey shadows, drifted noiselessly through the stinging air, talons tense for the swift thrust at hapless mouse or rabbit.

"Flash, you look hungry," said Brock in the morning, with a wry grin, as he tightened his belt, and started into the north. "To-day we hunt as we go. A couple of rabbits would taste pretty good, eh?"

If only they could run into caribou, thought the boy. But the presence of the wolves on the flanks of the migration doubtless had scattered the deer far and wide. As he travelled through scrub and forest he carried his rifle uncased for the chance of a shot at spruce partridge, ptarmigan, or snowshoe rabbit. But the game seemed to have left the country for he crossed few tracks, and, throughout the morning, fired his rifle but once, when he missed a running rabbit.

At noon, Brock built a small fire and rested. While Flash as yet showed little effect from his lack of food, Brock was fast weakening. The ache of his clamoring stomach had now ceased but in its

place stole a heaviness — a numbness into his limbs. He wondered how long he would be able to travel, searching for the river and lake, if he failed to strike game; two — three days, possibly another, then a starvation camp, where day by day, he would weaken, until he could no longer cut wood to keep his fire and the numbness of the white death would find him beside his dog. Poor old Flash! He would still hang on, for a husky starves slowly. And then again, before the husky was too weak, he might find rabbits, or caribou, and work back to camp and Gaspard.

Filling his stomach with hot water, with a shrug Brock turned to the dog. "Flash, like a fool, I got you into this mess. Now I'm goin' to get you out. Come on, boy, and we'll shoot some supper."

Before dusk dropped like a blanket on the Kiwedin wastes, Brock shot two rabbits, and that night, for a space, the fear in his heart was dulled.

"Pup," he said, to the dog who stood, mouth slavering in anticipation as Brock skinned the game, "don't fuss, you're goin' to have your share. I'm goin' to save the pelts, we may have to boil 'em later."

Then throwing a carcass to the hunger-mad dog who tore it to pieces and bolted it in a few fierce gulps, Brock continued: "It's always been share

and share alike, with us — and always will be. I may be weaker but you're hungrier, what?"

As Brock boiled the rabbit, the husky's eyes never left the pail from which rose delicious odors. "You'd like this one too?" The drawn face of the lad twisted in a smile. "Well, you see, pup, Brock needs it more. You'll be on your feet when he is through and done."

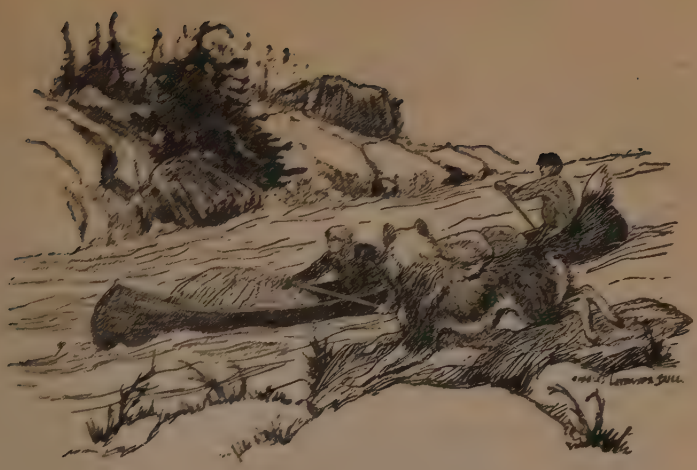
Wrapped in his robes by the fire, Brock's harassed thoughts thrashed back and forth over the days just passed. He recalled conversations before the trade-house stove at home, between his father and company men; tales of men lost and starving; tales of escape from the ruthless maw of the north, by sheer hardihood and indomitable spirit; tales of defeat, when a stouter heart would have meant, in a day — two days, victory, the winning back to food and life.

Often he had heard his father say that bush-craft, backed by nerve, would, in the end, bring any lost man home. What beat them was losing nerve and head at the same time.

Well, ruminated the boy in the robes, if nerve would drive him to the Yellow-Leg, he would make it to-morrow or next day. Then it would be a case of having the strength to reach the camp on the headwaters. But his strength was going fast. To

the best of his belief he had wandered east, past his trap-lines, in the blinding snow. If only he could meet caribou! What a feast he and Flash would have on red meat!

Then, there was Gaspard! Already, in search of his missing partner, he would have visited the trap-line camp. But Brock's trail to the big barren had been wiped out by the snow. Poor Gaspard!



CHAPTER XVII

THE HATE OF THE LONG SNOWS

Dawn of the following morning overtook the two still heading north. The rabbit had put new life into the husky. Although thinner, as yet his thick coat shone with vitality, and he still carried his bushy tail jauntily curved above his back. But the days of starvation and gruelling snow-shoeing had stripped the flesh from the square frame of Brock McCain. His hollow eyes glowed with the light that comes from toil without food. That morning, as he travelled, his eyes began to play him tricks. He found it difficult to focus on objects. Distant hills danced upon the horizon. Black spots

and pinpoints of light blurred his vision. Suddenly, like the chill of cold steel, the thought that he could not sight his gun on game stopped him in his tracks. Raising his rifle, he tried to line the sights on a jack-pine, but the bead on the muzzle wavered in and out of the rear sight slot which appeared, then faded, then appeared, as if mocking him.

Tears of desperation left Brock's eyes to freeze on his lean cheek bones as he lowered the gun. "I'd lose 'em now — even if I struck deer. I guess I'm done for," he groaned.

For a space black despair lived in the heart of the boy caught in the pitiless grip of the long snows. Then, as he stood brooding, a moist nose touched the bare hand holding the rifle. The caress of a warm tongue roused him. He glanced down at the eager brown eyes which spoke the worship of the loyal heart which beat in that shaggy chest.

"What you think, Flash, is the river over those hills? Can we make it, boy?"

For answer the dog whined, rubbing against Brock's legs, as the boy's hand rested on the massive skull.

"You're strong, boy, yet. Maybe, if we hit the river soon, you can pull me up to the lake. My legs won't last much longer. I can't feel 'em any more."

Then at the thought of his father's words the

boy pulled himself together. "Flash, we've got the nerve, you and I, if we are young, and shy on bush-craft. To-morrow, we're going through to the river — over that ridge!"

So Brock plodded on, hoping against hope for the sight of game. But the strange ill luck which often pursues those whose need is greatest, followed the footsteps of the starving trapper. Trails of fox and lynx, rabbit tracks, and the network paths of grouse and ptarmigan, he crossed, but for hours his peering eyes saw no game — met no floundering trail of caribou. They had left the country. Then, of a sudden, with a yelp, Flash started, sled behind him, into the scrub.

Following, Brock glimpsed two rabbits. Dropping to his knee, he fired — then fired again. But the rabbits kept on into the spruce. He had missed both.

Again dusk fell. Again there were no rabbit runways in which to set snares. Again boy and dog sat in silence by a fire. Over the fire hung a pail in which water boiled. In the water were strips of the pelts of two rabbits and small pieces of rawhide thongs. The eyes of the boy, bright with starvation, hungrily watched the nauseous stew.

"It won't help much, Flash," muttered the boy. "But it'll warm us up — warm us up. My feet are

cold — are yours? I can't feel my toes — the fire's no good."

Closer the great husky edged to the strangely silent master as the thin stew cooked in the pail.

"I guess we'll never see the river, Flash," Brock said, after a long space, his hand on the dog's head. "We've come far enough — but we're lost. When you're lost, pup, you never get anywhere."

With shaking hand the boy stirred the pitiful supper in the pail.

"We're lost — and starved out, Flash. Those rabbits I missed — easy shot, too — they'd taste good to-night." The boy sighed as he lifted the stew from the fire. "My legs are good for one day more — then I guess I'm through."

The starving pair finished the stew, then side by side lay before the fire.

"Of course, Flash," wandered the semi-delirious Brock, "I could shoot my pup — and get back. Lots of meat on your old bones — yet. Right through the ears, eh? You'd never know what Brock did to you — and then he'd see home again — the family. What d'yuh say?"

With a low whimper, the husky beside him nuzzled into the boy's face, buried in his hood under the robes.

"Don't want Brock to do it, do yuh?"

As if sensing the ghastly meaning of the words, the dog again thrust his nose into the hood. For an instant his hairy muzzle touched the lean cheek of his master. Then with a throaty rumble it was withdrawn.

"You old fool!" cried the aroused youth, sitting up in his blankets, stung by the dog's caress. "You think Brock was serious? Crawl out by shootin' his pup — like a dirty Indian?" Impulsively the boy drew the massive head of the husky to his breast. "You fool dog! Brock shoot his Flash to save his own hide?" And the boy crooned incoherently into a hairy ear. As the great plume of a tail waved to and fro, the deep throat of Flash rumbled in ecstacy.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM THE FRONTIERS OF DEATH

DAWN — and a dazed voyageur, seeking the valley of the frozen Yellow-Leg, shuffled on unsteady legs through the spruce into the north — at his heels a bony husky drawing a small toboggan. At intervals, as they travelled, the boy stopped to rest and squint uncertainly at the far ridges — now blurred to his vision — now distorted. For he was starving.

Through the morning went the pair, stopping frequently to rest. Lean from lack of food though he was, the husky, owing to his marvelous vitality,

still retained much of his strength. For the Ungava, like a wolf, starves slowly. But the master who reeled over the white floor of forest and barren, neared the end of his stamina. Two — three miles more, and the numbed legs would crumple under him — the snow-shoes which slid mechanically, driven by the dogged will, cease to move.

Then, of a sudden, as the uncertain eyes of the boy, whom hope had deserted, peered ahead for the wind-break which would shelter his last camp, his heart gave a great throb, then checked, to pound again furiously as he swayed on his feet at what he saw.

"Deer trail!" he gasped. "Deer trail, Flash!"

In his excitement Brock tried to run to the broken snow where the caribou had passed, but his stiffened legs faltered. As he fell, the dog plunged ahead to sniff frantically where the deer had wallowed through four feet of snow.

Brock rose and shuffled to the trail. "Made this morning! He can't travel far in this!" he cried, delirious with joy. "We'll hang to him, Flash — hang to him!"

Then the boy shivered as stark fear gripped him. Could he aim his gun? Could he hit the game?

But there was no place for doubt here. He had to hit him. It was his last chance.

Leading Flash on a raw-hide thong, to prevent him bolting with the sled when they saw their game, Brock followed the trail. Hope now drove his stiffened legs — hope of red meat, food — life. And here, at last, the careful training of months proved itself. On a leash Flash had been trained to silence.

"Shut up, Flash!" Brock commanded. "Steady, boy — shut up, Flash!"

Had he dared, with all that was at stake, he would have insured silence by gagging the dog — lest hunger and excitement betray him into a wild yelping on sighting the deer ahead. But a gag would paralyze the dog's jaws when they might be sorely needed. If he wounded the deer, Flash, with jaws free, might pull him down in the deep snow — save them in the end.

The trail led through a stand of scrub spruce and out over the packed snow of the icy shell of a brook. Here Brock suddenly stopped, his jaw dropping in amazement.

"Moose!" he gasped. "Moose, up here on the Yellow-Leg!"

Instead of the familiar, round-toed tracks of a caribou, stamped into the hard footing, like the thrust of a die in wax, were the long, pointed, cow-like tracks of a moose.

"Moose, Flash! He won't travel long in this snow. They never do. He's not far."

Following the trail which led in the direction of a heavy stand of black spruce and cedar, under a ridge, Brock led his plunging dog.

"Shut up, Flash! Steady boy!" he ordered in low tones, "He's there, in that bush."

The animal had travelled up wind — he would not smell them; so it was safe to hold to the trail. Slipping off the dog's harness, leaving the sled, Brock led him by the thong. As they entered the cover of the timber, ears and eyes tense, the heart of the boy shook him as an engine shakes a launch. Somewhere ahead in the spruce was food — life. If only he did not miss!

For an instant, he paused, in doubt. He would rest his gun against a tree — if he could — had time. But suppose Flash lunged as he fired? It might be safer to lash him here. No, he did not dare. His hand shook like a leaf — he would only wound the moose — would need Flash.

So, weak with famine and excitement, Brock went on — on into the thick timber, nerves strung like bow-strings, straining uncertain eyes for the vision of a huge shape in the snow. For a hundred yards they followed the trail, stopping often to look for a patch of black in the thick young growth

ahead. Then, dilating his nostrils in deep sniffs of the air, Flash suddenly went mad.

Falling on the trembling husky, Brock seized his nose. "Shut up, Flash!" he gasped in desperation. "Steady, boy! Shut up!"

But the starved dog trembled where he crouched, wild to charge the beast whose scent was strong in his nostrils. With stiff fingers, Brock knotted the leash to a sapling, and left his dog, to make the stalk.

He had moved but a few yards when suddenly he saw a patch of black dimly between the dark green of two young spruce trees. Life hung on the pitiful hands which raised his rifle to his shoulder. His eyes blurred as the bead wavered past the open rear sight. Again he looked for his target.

The black patch was gone.

With a groan the boy reeled forward, his fevered eyes peering desperately into the timber already blue with shadow. Then, to his flank, he saw a shape floundering in snow to its shoulders. It was the last chance!

Crouching, with elbow on knee, Brock fired.

As the rifle shattered the silence, a great grey and white shape, sinking to the shoulders at every leap, plunged past.

"Flash!"

With all the strength he could summon, Brock ran. He had missed — hardly seen his sights! "One more shot — only one shot!" he sobbed, as he shuffled after the dog who had snapped his leash.

Brock reached the trail of the moose where the dog had joined it. Not a drop of blood on the snow! He had missed.

Ahead, Flash yelped, hard in pursuit of the fleeing beast. But the long legs of the moose would out-distance the dog in the deep snow. It was all over! They had lost! It was — the end!

Panting in his weakness, Brock stumbled forward over the broken trail left by moose and dog. Then, of a sudden, the yelps of the husky changed to roars of rage.

Flash had caught him!

Clutching his rifle the boy kept on, hoping, still hoping for one last shot. He pushed through young growth toward an opening to hear close at hand the fighting snarl of his dog.

"He's stopped him!" he panted. "Flash's stopped him! Get him, Flash!"

Brock McCain broke through the thicket to gasp in amazement. Rearing in the snow, a young bull, his horns still in the spike, lashed with his great forefeet at the dog who leaped around him. Hair stiff, eyes blood-shot, his breath escaping

from dilated nostrils like the exhaust of an engine, with his sharp hoofs the bull flayed the air as the dog lunged in and out. And then, as the desperate beast tried to rise on his hind legs and fell back helpless, Brock saw.

"Ham-strung! Flash, boy, you've saved us with your teeth!"

Mercifully Brock ended the fight with a bullet through the beast's brain. The bull lurched to the snow where he had turned to fight the grey demon whose teeth had torn the hock tendons of both hind legs, crippling him. As the animal fell, blackness closed on the vision of the exhausted boy, and he fainted.

The starving husky, mad with the taste of blood, tore savagely at the throat of the moose, then at the sight of the crumpled figure of Brock, ran to him with a whine. Slowly the biting air revived the youth whose desperate exertion had sapped the last ounce of his stamina. He got to his feet while the dog went back to his red meat.

"My old Flash pup!" said Brock, caressing the husky. "Ham-strung him you did, old pal! Bless your bones!"

But the dusk was close and there was no time to lose. Leading the reluctant dog from his quarry, Brock, delirious with joy at his luck, went back for

the sled. And there, in the swamp, within easy reach of the meat which would thicken his blood and give him back his strength while he rested, he built a fire and made camp.

But Brock was wise, and sitting by his fire with the gorged Flash, he drank, at intervals, a small cup only, of the broth from the simmering pot of moose broth. Full well he knew the danger of filling a starved and weakened stomach, and that night — craving it though he did — he touched no meat.

"We'll see home, now — Hungry House and the family. And old Gaspard, what'll he think has become of us, Flash?" he rambled on in his joy, to the dog at his side. "But we're lost — we've got to find the river, old pal. We'll camp right here, feedin' on that bull, 'til Brock gets his legs back, then we'll take a hundred pounds of meat and circle north-west, what?"

Surfeited with food and heavy with sleep, the dog grunted.

"Your hide's full of meat to-night, you old pig! Not much like the last camp we made, eh? We never starved before, but we know what it's like now. Ham-strung him, didn't yuh, with those tusks? You wolf! Got him when Brock couldn't see his sights?" Then the boy leaned and buried his hooded face in the grey mane of the dog who grunted with contentment at his side.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TRACKS IN THE SNOW

For days Brock camped beside the frozen moose meat, while his strength returned. Soon the wholesome stews and steaks thickened his blood and his lean frame filled out. As his endurance increased he climbed the nearest ridges to search the horizon for a familiar land-mark, but to his bewilderment and chagrin, found none. In the end, he was forced to the realization that, instead of being south

of the headwater lakes and the river valley, he must have worked to the west, in the two days' blizzard.

With the return of his strength Brock lost no time in starting to work his way back to the partner who had no doubt already given him up as lost and starved out. Taking a hundred pounds of meat, a heavy load for the husky travelling across country, Brock turned south-east. In the hollow of his arm he carried his uncased rifle, for he was now sure he was well beyond the big lake, in the enemy's country. Constantly, as he travelled, he watched his flanks and back trail, for the memory of his capture was still vivid. And, as so often happens to hunters, now that his sled was heavy with meat, he crossed many trails of moving caribou; snow-shoe rabbits loped away at his approach; the whirr of rising ptarmigan and spruce partridge often greeted his ears. Once, in his need, he had walked two days and seen but two rabbits.

Brock camped that night in a country still unfamiliar, but the next day at noon, from a barren hill, he sighted, far to the east, the well-known ridges circling the great lake. As the short day waned and he looked for a camp ground, suddenly he came to a dead stop.

Cocking his rifle, the boy knelt beside his curious

dog, as his roving eyes covered the spruce and jack-pine timber surrounding him, in a searching inspection. A snow-shoe trail! How old? he wondered.

Hearing, seeing nothing, after a space Brock walked to the tracks in the snow and bent to study them.

"By the great horned owl, Flash!" he said to the dog sniffing at the trail, "It's Gaspard!"

The familiar shape of the shoes, which Gaspard had himself made, and a splice in the webbing, identified them.

"Now what is he after I wonder?" said the curious boy, aloud. "He's given me up as wiped out, I'll bet, and has gone on a man hunt."

In the morning, because of the better footing it gave the toiling husky, Brock took Gaspard's trail back to camp. At the head of the lake Brock's eyes widened in surprise as he stared at the tracks in front of him. Then, he moved swiftly into a clump of young spruce and waited, ears alert. A chickadee called, then the silence remained unbroken. Cautiously Brock walked down the trail to what had stopped him.

The story the snow told was easy to read. Someone had followed Gaspard's trail up to this point, where he had left it to travel a hundred yards to the right.

"What shall I do, Flash?" queried the puzzled youth. The trails were not fresh, that was evident. There had been a flurry of snow the day before. It lay on the tracks. If Gaspard had been ambushed, it had been two days before. He was beyond help. If they had captured him, it was too late to overtake them now. Finally Brock decided to take the meat to the cache, and return on Gaspard's trail with Flash loose. He would never again travel without his dog.

About five miles from the boys' camp, the tracks which overlay Gaspard's trail had joined it, leading from the lake. Worried for his partner's safety, Brock reached the camp to find it undisturbed, and to meet a loud greeting from three ravenous dogs wired to trees. The welcome of Kona and Slit-Ear to the wanderer, Flash, was unrestrained in its exuberance, but as the big puppy stalked up to his rival, Yellow-Eye, tail waving, red mouth in a wide grin, the older husky met his friendly advance with jealous dignity. The slant eyes of the slate-grey and white puppy, whom he had formerly bullied, now met his from the same level. One hundred and twenty-five pounds of bone and iron muscle stood between Yellow-Eye and his former kingship of the team. His great plume of a tail slowly waved as he eyed the usurper

grinning in his face; but in the amber eyes with the red lower lids glittered veiled hostility.

"What d'yuh think of the pup, now, you old wolf?" demanded Brock, leaning and patting the thick mane of the older dog.

Swiftly the friendliness in Flash's manner shifted to jealousy. His hair lifted; his ears flattened; from the deep throat rumbled a note of protest that the beloved master should so honor the king-dog. In turn, Yellow-Eye bristled, stiff-legged, sucking in his breath with a low snarl.

"Stop! Both of you!" rasped Brock, slapping each in turn and leaving Yellow-Eye rumbling at his tree. "Nice time you'd have killing each other, if you were alone, eh?"

Entering the tent now nearly buried in snow, Brock found a roll of the inner bark of a birch on which had been burned with a stick characters of the syllabic writing used by the Crees.

Taught the phonetic symbols as a boy by an old Cree at the post, Brock had often made use of this Indian short-hand and easily read the message:

"Twice I hunted far for your trail. Now I go to look for these people. I will come back in a few days, but if you are not here, then Gaspard Lecroix will go into the north to join his father."

"Good old Gaspard!" exclaimed the youth, his

eyes blurred by moisture. "He looked for me after the snow buried my trail, and has given me up. He's not going back to Hungry House; he's going north to hunt them down."

Starting a fire in the tent stove to cook his supper, Brock lost no time in deciding on his next move. Gaspard had been gone at least two days. In the morning he would take Flash and all the grub he could easily carry in his pack and follow the trail. If they had captured his friend, the snow would tell the story — then what? He would wave a goodby toward the south and those he held dear, at Hungry House, and follow Gaspard as the half-breed had followed Brock and his captors. And at the end, the boy promised himself, Flash and Brock McCain would show these renegades how a white boy and his dog could fight for his partner.

CHAPTER XX

FROM THE LIPS OF A STRICKEN CREE

A FORTNIGHT before, when the blizzard drove down on the frozen valleys of Kiwedin, Gaspard worked back to camp raising and hanging his traps as he travelled, for they would be useless buried under the snow. Thinking that Brock had decided to weather it out in his camp on the flank of the great barren, Gaspard waited for his return at the end of the norther — but Brock did not come. Puzzled, the half-breed went to the outlying camp of his friend, where, to his amazement, he found that Brock had not spent the two days of the wind and snow. Where had he gone?

Then Gaspard made a wide circle into the south and west, but the country lay under two feet of new snow and Brock's trail along the barren in his search for the caribou had been wiped out.

Worried, Lecroix returned to camp. His partner

had been caught, somewhere, while hunting. If he had meat, he would work his way home. But three days passed and Brock did not return. Again Gaspard circled far to the south and west, but found no fresh trail of the boy and dog he sought. Brock was a good hunter; he would not starve, and he wouldn't stay lost, he'd work north and home. Then the thought of how his father had vanished into these pitiless white hills chilled Gaspard's heart. Was he to lose Brock, his friend, also? Brock, whom he loved as a brother?

Sorrowfully, the half-breed returned to camp. The days went by and Brock did not return. Did he lie, starved, somewhere, stiff in the snow, or had he run into these people from the north? At length, hope died, and Gaspard wrote the message which he felt the eyes of Brock would never read, and started on his man hunt.

To the rich catch of fur which they had hidden in their cache in the swamp, he gave no consideration. At Hungry House this fur would buy him much that he needed. But Hungry House had seen the last of Gaspard Lecroix. Brock was gone, and he had promised them he would bring him safely home in the spring. The spirit of his father called him — the father whose bones had lain unburied, the sport of bird and beast — whose death was as yet unavenged.

So, with food for a few days in his pack, for he would return once more, then load his sled and take the team into the north, Gaspard started on a circle beyond the head of the lake.

He had passed the inlet — ten miles from camp, when, in a thick stand of young spruce, he turned sharply to the right and from the cover of a clump of seedlings, watched his back-track. What sixth sense had given him the uneasy feeling that he was being followed, he could not explain. But, in the last mile, he had turned many times, to watch the trail he had left in the snow. The morning was still, without wind, but he had heard no click of the bows, no creak of shoes on the snow, dry as powder. But the stalker would have seen to that — he would have muffled the sound. No, if there was someone on his trail, he was far back.

With a cocked gun Gaspard settled in his "hide" to wait. It was bitter cold and as he raised the hammer, the steel sucked at the skin, leaving a raw thumb. The barrel bound with raw-hide to protect the fingers of the left hand he held in a mittened hand. Then he noticed that his frozen breath rose straight above the low cover in which he lay. It would be seen. So Gaspard shifted his ambush to a thicket farther on.

Shivering with the intense cold which cut

through his caribou-skin capote, the half-breed was fast becoming convinced that his premonition was false, when he suddenly stiffened where he lay. The barrel of his rifle slowly lifted as his right eye lined the sights. A hundred yards distant a hooded figure carrying a rifle, moved over the trail.

Glancing to right and left, the stalker shuffled a few yards, then stopped to listen. From where he lay Gaspard could see that the bows of the Indian's shoes had been muffled with skin.

So they were hunting him again, were they — these people who had hunted his father? Stalking him as one trails an unsuspecting caribou? Well, before the snows faced in April he would give them their bellies full of this little game. The small eyes that followed the Indian trailer over the rifle sights glittered with hate. Slowly one closed. Again the right eye covered the approaching shape with the bead sight of the muzzle. A finger moved — and the soundless forest echoed with a splitting roar.

With a scream, the crouching shape on the trail lunged into the snow. From the thicket above which drifted a wisp of grey smoke, clicked the action of a rifle as the lever tossed aside an empty shell and pumped a cartridge into the barrel.

Again, silence settled on the spruce. Slowly the snow beneath a sprawled leg of the crumpled figure reddened.

Then, circling cautiously until he saw the gun of the would-be assassin lying where it had fallen, out of reach, Gaspard walked boldly to the unconscious Indian.

"Ah-hah!" he muttered. Then, first drawing the knife slung to the Cree's sash and tossing it away, Gaspard examined the wound. His shot had gone home. He had struck the thigh as he had intended, and the Cree had fainted from shock and pain.

Quickly the half-breed fashioned a tourniquet of the Cree's sash and bound the leg. Then, shortly, he had a fire going. Carrying the groaning man to the fire he laid him on a bed of boughs. But in spite of the tight bandage above the wound, to Gaspard's surprise the hemorrhage continued.

As the Cree became conscious of his surroundings, Gaspard forced hot tea down his throat. The stimulant did its work.

"You wish to live," rasped the youth, in the Cree language, "you talk with a single tongue."

Fear-shot eyes in the seamed features of the stricken Indian searched the cold face of the man who had outwitted him. Again Gaspard held the black tea to the grey lips.

"What you track me for — to kill or take me?" began the inquisitor.

The Cree shut his eyes, but gave no answer.

"Where is your camp?"

The menacing face of Lecroix approached the other's.

"Far from here, in the north."

"How many Crees and white men?"

"Many — eight, ten."

"Who is the chief — the boss?"

"A white man who came in a ship. He has a red beard."

Then the youth drew his skinning knife. His glittering eyes drew close to the ash-grey face of the man who lay by the fire under the blankets. "Were you here — last long snows — in this country?" he asked, hoarse with passion.

The pinched face nodded.

"There was a man — from the south — ambushed, in the month of the melting snow. Is he alive?"

In the eyes of the Indian fear gave way to a look of bewilderment, of agony, as he gasped: "I am very sick."

"You saw this hunter?" pressed the inexorable son of Pierre Lecroix.

The Indian feebly nodded.

"Is he alive?"

There was no answer. The man in the blankets was unconscious. Gaspard threw off the blankets to examine the wounded leg. The boughs and the snow beneath it were stained with blood.

Desperately the boy tightened the tourniquet to stop the hemorrhage. Then he packed the leg in snow. The bullet must have hit the big artery. But the man must not die — this man who had seen his father, who knew his fate!

Gaspard glanced at the distorted face, bloodless, still; then fumbled under the Indian's capote for the heart beat. There was none.

Rising, the baffled son of Pierre Lecroix shook his fists at the insensate spruce. In his heart was no pity for this man at his feet, who had tracked him that day to shoot him through the back. These men had taken from him the father he loved — were ruthlessly hunting down Brock and himself. At that moment, his missing partner might lie somewhere, stiff in the snow, as this assassin lay here, at his feet.

It was war to the death, now, between Gaspard Lecroix and the men who had taken from him father and his friend. Through the winter he would hunt them as one hunts the wolverine who robs the traplines. Before the March crust they would learn

that on their trails followed a tracker, merciless as the carcajou, untiring as the timber wolf.

Hungry House would never see him again. In the end, these people who had taken this country for their own, would ambush him, kill him in his sleep, but before that came, terror of the swift death which haunted their heels would ice their hearts with dread. Before the trails softened under the spring sun, they would pay — pay for Pierre Lecroix and Brock McCain. The war was on!

CHAPTER XXI

THE RETURN OF THE LOST

LEAVING the body of the Cree to the toothed and clawed mercies of the wood-folk, who would shortly find it under the heap of snow with which Gaspard covered it, he continued on his wide circle north of the big lake. Two days later, having seen no snow-shoe tracks in the many miles he had covered, he found at the outlet, the trail of the man who had stalked him. It was evident that the strangers were not trapping near Big Yellow-Leg Lake, as he and Brock had named it. When they came to the lake, they were looking for the trappers from the south whose trail they had

found before they took Brock, weeks before. The Cree from whose lips death had checked the revelation of Pierre Lecroix' fate had been sent to hunt for them. That was evident. And they would send more. This Cree had passed unwittingly within three miles of the main camp. Some time they would find it and wait for Gaspard's return. He would take the dogs and the grub and find another location.

Heartsick with thoughts of his missing partner, Gaspard approached the camp. Eighteen days now, he thought. With the country full of game Brock couldn't have starved, even if lost. And if lost, in time he was bound to find the lakes or the river. No, they had taken or killed him — the friend he loved.

The dogs, ravenous with hunger, greeted him with a chorus of yelps. Then he saw, standing in the snow, Brock's trapping sled. His heart bounded. Brock was safe — had come home! Brock was alive — his partner — was alive!

"Kekway!" he shouted in his joy, running to the tent. "Ha! You Brock!" But the tent was empty. He had gone again! Where?

Circling the camp, Gaspard found his own trail of three days before, followed by the well-known tracks of Brock's wider webs.

"By Gar! He go to find Gaspard!" cried the excited hunter. Then, in his emotion, he hugged each of the clamoring huskies.

With Brock alive, the situation was changed. He now had someone to live for — to take care of. His promise to Angus McCain, made at Hungry House, to bring Brock back, bound him. He could not ask his partner to go north with him and throw his life away in a mad attempt at vengeance. He would stay with Brock and trap while the fur was prime, then in March, he would journey north in search of his foes. If he failed to return, Brock could take the dogs and run the river to the sea, alone, and carry to Hungry House a fur-pack that would pull the eyes out of the factor's head.

For a space Gaspard hesitated between following up his partner or waiting his return. The grave in the snow would tell its story and Brock might turn back — then again he might keep on. The half-breed did not like the idea of Brock following his wide swing north of the lake. Others might have crossed those webbed prints, and Brock was reckless. Finally he decided to make the round of the traps and wait.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, as he followed Slit-Ear pulling the hind-quarters of a caribou in over the ice-hard trail leading to the

camp, Flash met them with an extravagant welcome.

"Hello, you man-killer! What d'yuh mean by leaving just as I totter back after starving out in the bush?"

The lean face of Gaspard shone with his joy at seeing his friend.

"You ole Brock! You geeve me some bad day, Brock!" he cried, pounding the shoulder of the stalwart white boy, as he wrung his hand. "I hunt an' hunt for your trail —"

"But tell me," Brock interrupted. "You were followed, and you waited for him. But how did you know he was on your trail?"

"I feel dat dey were after me, dat morning. And you saw heem?"

"Yes, I wanted to be sure he didn't get you and leave on your shoes, so I looked at the body. But I never saw you make such a poor shot."

"I want to hear of my fader."

"Oh, I see," said Brock, softly. "Did you learn anything?"

"No, de Cree have seen my fader — he know; but he was weak an' nevaire tell how my fader die."

"Too bad! I'm mighty sorry, partner." Brock rested a mittened hand on the shoulder of his friend,

whose dark features pictured the bitterness of his disappointment. Then the black eyes lit with curiosity.

"But w'ere you bin, Brock? — You get lost een dat blow; you travel in circle, eh? De wind she shift, twice."

Brock grinned. "That's just it! I didn't know the wind shifted, and thought I was over east of here, so I started north to find the river and get my bearings. But I was up west." Then, over a supper of caribou steaks and tea, Brock told his story.

"Nevaire travel een a norder again," commented the bush-wise Gaspard. "Wait for de sun; den you don' get lost."

"By gar, dat Flash ees smart dog!" cried the half-breed, when Brock told of missing the moose. "De wolf ham-string caribou; but bull-moose, in de deep snow ees ver' strong. Dat ees cross dog, dat Flash!"

"His heart's all iron, and the way he travelled on an empty stomach was a caution. He hadn't eaten for days when he tackled that moose. Gaspard, if anything happened to that pup, I'd want to quit."

The lean features of the other lighted in understanding. It was Brock McCain's way, to love

his friend, his dog, with all the capacity of his big heart. There were no reservations in Brock.

"So you nevaire foun' de deer?"

"Never saw one after the blow!"

"Wal, dey are back on de beeg barren," announced Gaspard, with a grin. "To-day I see many."

"We'd better make a big hunt, then, and cache meat for our spring trip."

"Yes, we mak' beeg meat cache somew'ere een de back countree. And we shif' dis camp. Dose peopl' find us for sure, some day. We leeve dis place and mak' new camp."

CHAPTER XXII

THE CLICKING HOOFS OF THE CARIBOU

THROUGH the long months of the northern winter, four dogs, averaging more than one hundred pounds in weight, require a vast amount of fish and meat. Saving much of the whitefish, a more nourishing dog-food than caribou, for the spring, dogs and boys had lived largely on deer. Rabbit, ptarmigan, and spruce partridge, which they snared, gave an occasional change of diet. The flour and corn-meal, they now began to use sparingly. The geese shot on the bay they held for an emergency. But the frozen caribou on the cache was about gone, with four months of winter re-

maining, so the return of the deer to the big barren was timely.

Hitching the dogs to the long, hauling sled which had come on the canoe load all the way from Hungry House, with Flash in the rear, behind Slit-Ear, to separate him from the leader, Yellow-Eye, the boys started over Brock's trap-line trail, buried under the new snow. As they travelled, they stopped to chop out and re-set Brock's mink and otter traps, now frozen and buried under the snow and ice of the streams; to dig out his fox sets along the lake shores, the fisher and marten cabanes on the higher ground and the lynx traps and snares on the rabbit runs in the birch and willow thickets. Gaspard led the team, tramping the new snow down to the ice-hard trail beneath, now frozen solid to the ground by the constant travelling of Brock and Flash with the trapping sled. Along the shores of small lakes and ponds where the wind had scoured the ice clean of drift, the boys rode the empty sled while the dogs raced, tails waving like flags in the keen air, leaving in their wake a white ribbon of frozen breath.

And to their delight, under the drift on the shore of a lake they found buried under two feet of snow, a black fox. The Blizzard had hidden the precious pelt from prowling lynx and carcajou, from the

sharp eyes of hungry pekan and exploring marten; from grey and snowy owl.

"It'll buy the Peterboro for us!" cried the excited trapper, holding up for his partner's inspection the shimmering, ebony fur of the most valuable pelt of the northern forests.

"Oui, and a pair of pure blooded Ungava pups, beside," added Gaspard, dropping his mitten to make the glossy coat ripple through his fingers. "Dat pelt ees first-class, prime, black fox. Your fader lak' to see dat, eh?"

"It was that awful, rotten fish and beaver-castor mixture in the bottle you filled for me, smeared on rabbit, that got him. Lucky for us he found it before the snow."

On their way to the little camp of Brock at the end of the lines, the boys picked up three mink, an otter and a fisher; found two marten traps robbed by wolverines, and three, which they re-set, sprung by whiskey-jacks. It was, indeed, a fur country to fight for — this headwater land of the Yellow-Leg. And the unknown white men who had taken it for their own, would hold it jealously against all trespassers from the south.

With the tangible warnings Gaspard and Brock already had had, to attempt to finish the winter on the Yellow-Leg Lakes meant a life of con-

stant vigilance. Once their enemies from the north worked south of the big lake and found the trap-line trails, they might be ambushed or taken in their sleep, for the dogs could be poisoned or shot. But never, for an instant, did the two hunters consider a retreat. The heart of Gaspard Lecroix knew but one desire — desire for knowledge of how his father died and for vengeance on those responsible for his death. And little as Brock relished the idea of leaving his bones in the wilderness of the Yellow-Leg, his loyalty to his friend and his fighting spirit admitted no thought of avoiding what the long snows held for them. Already they had given the strangers good proof of what man hunters might expect in the forests to the south. Two had gone out, never to return. And later, on the March crust, when the going was good, the hunted ones would turn hunters. And before the bottom fell out of the trails and the April thaws drove them south to their canoe to wait for the ice to leave the river, the man hunters from the Carcajou country would have had their fill of the two boys from the Starving River. So ran the thoughts of the friends as they made camp on the eve of the hunt on the big barren.

Under stars still bright in a purple sky, Brock and Gaspard cooked breakfast. Leaving the whim-

pering dogs — begging to be taken — wired to trees, the partners snow-shoed to the flank of the barren and waited for dawn. Dressed though they were in heavy wool covered by slip-on caribou capotes with hair outside, belted snugly to their waists, the wolverine linings of their hoods ringing their faces were soon white with hoar frost which iced their eyebrows. Moving back and forth in the scrub on the flank of the barren and swinging their arms, with difficulty the boys kept their blood moving in the withering cold which always precedes the dawn. Two days before, Gaspard had counted a hundred caribou, but now, as the blue east greyed, and the frosty stars paled and faded, they wondered whether ghostly patrols of the phantom wanderers of the north were out there in the shadows digging with round-toed hoofs for the reindeer moss of the barren.

At last the bitter dawn slashed through the ashen east with rose and pearl and amber slits of light. As the shivering hunters watched with straining eyes from the edge of the barren, the dusk began to fade, but the white plain was still shot with wavering shadow. Were those dim shapes deer — or bushes?

"What's that out there?" muttered Brock, pointing with a mitten.

In the uncertain half-light, something surely moved across the snow — a dim grey shape, and was gone.

"Fox!" said Gaspard.

Slowly from eastern ridges, groping fingers of light flickered out over the ash-grey floor of snow. The shadows died. It was daylight.

"There they are!" said Brock, between his chattering teeth, slipping his right hand from the mitten suspended from his shoulder by a thong. "Three — six — ten of 'em!"

Before them ten caribou, in their blue winter coats, were feeding, their frosted breath rising like jets of steam.

"Dere ees no win'," whispered the half-breed. "We follow dat bush dere an' get all."

The hunters circled back and crept through a point of scrub reaching into the barren toward the unsuspecting deer, now within easy rifle-shot.

"You tak' de bull wid beeg horn!" Gaspard whispered to his friend. Then the frozen silence was split by the explosion of two rifles. A large bull leaped into the air, plunged forward, stopped, then made a short circle, to lunge into the snow. A cow reared on her hind legs, beat the air with forefeet, and fell dead. The others, mad with fright, leaped and circled aimlessly, sniffing the

air for the direction of the danger which threatened. Again and again the rifles cracked. Then, from the stricken band, three fear-frenzied survivors fled across the barren, their flexible hoofs clicking sharply on the still air as they ran.

"Seven!" cried Brock, when two wounded deer had been put out of their misery. "That's a good start, Gaspard! We'll build a cache at the little camp and shoot enough more to take us through to the spring break-up."

"Yes, they may not be here in the moon w'en de Cree starve; we mak' de beeg cache for us an' de dog."

The remainder of the day the boys spent in cutting up the caribou and hauling the meat with the dogs to the platform cache seven feet high which they built in thick timber near the camp. Then trimming the spruce uprights smooth with their axes, they circled them with inverted fish-hooks to baffle thieving wolverines who might attempt to climb them. A lynx would leap to the platform from the snow, but a lynx is a clean eater. He would not defile the meat. At the carcasses of the deer, they set traps, for night would bring every prowler within miles down wind, to the feast on the white barren.

The following morning, putting their copper

kettle of deer stew and the tea pail on the freshened fire, Gaspard and Brock hurried to the barren.

"We've got something in those fox traps!" said Brock, as they approached the carcasses.

"De fox have fine meal last night, for sure," answered the other.

Near the bodies of the deer the snow was networked with fox tracks, and two of the traps were occupied.

"A red and a cross!" announced Brock, with satisfaction.

"Yes, and look at dat feller out dere!"

Beside the last deer shot, fifty yards away, lay a huge grey shape in the snow.

"By the great horned owl, Gaspard, we got a wolf!"

Neither of the hunters had his rifle but Gaspard carried his light axe. As they approached, the mottled grey shape in the snow did not move.

"He play dead, eh?"

As there were no small trees or bushes to foul an ordinary clog, when he set the trap Gaspard had cut and trimmed a four inch spruce sapling with which a trapped wolf would not run far. Surrounding the beast where he lay watching his approaching captors through evil, red-rimmed eyes, the snow had been trampled in a wide circle by

the efforts of the wolf to tear his forefoot from the vise-like jaws of the trap.

"Be careful!" warned Brock. "He'll jump the length of that clog-chain."

The cool half-breed chuckled as he raised the axe in his right hand and deliberately walked toward the crouching wolf. Then, with hair stiff on neck and back, the trapped animal rose, his red lips lifted from long fangs in a menacing snarl. With the blade of the axe reversed, head forward, Gaspard stood at the rim of the trampled circle in the snow.

Then, frenzied by fear and pain, the brute stiffened in a crouch and sprang with the trap. The clog-chain straightened in the air, jerking the wolf to the snow in a complete somersault. As the frenzied beast regained its feet, Gaspard leaped and the head of the axe crashed into its skull at the eyes. Dead on its feet, the brute crumpled.

"Smart work, old partner!" cried Brock in admiration of the timing and force of the blow, "but if you'd missed, he'd have slashed you — on those shoes."

"Mebbe so," replied the half-breed starting to skin the wolf before the body froze, "but he got to be ver' quick to catch Gaspard Lecroix."

"I believe you, but it's easier to put a bullet through the head — and safer."

Two remaining traps Brock found unsprung, and was returning to help his partner remove the wolf pelt when with an exclamation of surprise he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Hey, Gaspard! Come here!" he called.

Leaving his skinning, the other went to where Brock was examining some tracks near a carcass.

"Look at that wolf track!"

In the snow trampled by the caribou, near the bows of Brock's shoes, was the clearly defined print of the left hind foot of a wolf — minus one toe.

For a space Gaspard kneeled and studied the track, then with a nod, raised his hooded face to his friend.

"It is Tete-Noir, my father's dog," he said huskily. "She has turn wolf. It ees the same track I saw in the freezing moon."

For a space, the son of Pierre Lecroix and his friend gazed at the imprint of the mutilated foot in silence, then Brock said: "Well, Gaspard, we'll lie low for the next six weeks and pile up a big catch of fur, then we'll strike north and do a little ambushing on our own hook. We'll get one of these Crees on his trap-lines and make him talk."

Gaspard nodded. "I nevaire strike back for Starving Riviere before I find out how my fader die."

"I'm with you, partner!"

With the meat safely cached and the dogs wired to separate trees, where they gnawed to their hearts' content on caribou ribs, the partners followed the barren into the west. It was a clear day when the frozen plain shimmered like a sea of fire — a day when the caribou bands, having fed, like to lie in the sun in open places, on lake and barren, when the wind is dead.

The hunters had not travelled an hour in the scrub on the rim of the barren when they saw many deer sunning themselves not two hundred yards from the cover of the scrub. Working back out of sight Brock and Gaspard stole silently through the small spruce and tamarack, then crept out to the lip of the barren.

There, before them, within rifle shot, were thirty caribou. Some were feeding, others lying down enjoying the sun. Fawns of that year, in their first blue coat, scampered about in play. Young bulls charged and thrust at each other with spike horns. Old bulls with long branching antlers, which they would drop early in January, basked, enjoying the first clear day in weeks, although the air was keen with cold. Then a group of young bulls, suddenly stopping their antics, left the others and drifted down the hardly perceptible breeze to investigate the grey shapes moving at the edge of the scrub.

The hunters stiffened in their tracks, rifles ready in their hands. But caribou are stupid and have poor sight, so pay little attention to sound or movement, trusting for protection to the sense of smell. With heads high, testing the air with quivering nostrils, from which rose their frozen breath like puffs of smoke, the curious creatures advanced with their peculiar high knee action. Peering with uncertain eyes at the strange shapes, stiff as the spruce behind them, the deer moved nearer, when the two rifles cracked.

Two deer leaped, started to circle up-wind and fell. The others reeled back to their haunches in surprise, then wheeled in terror and fled toward the main body, their snow-shoe-like hoofs clicking in the still air.

Again two rifles exploded, again, and again.

In mad panic, for a space the main band circled aimlessly, leaping high from the snow, then, with white tails up, fled out across the barren, led by a cow.

"Good shot, Gaspard!" cried Brock, as the half-breed knelt, and firing the last shell in his gun, brought down a galloping caribou at three hundred yards. "Well, we won't starve until April, if the wolverines don't get this meat," continued the excited Brock, counting the deer on the snow.

"Eight, we got every one! That's better shooting than any red Crees in this country could show!"

But Gaspard was already halfway to the deer he had hit with the running shot.

"I'll start on 'em while you go after the dogs," said Brock when his partner returned. "It's a good day to use a knife, we won't freeze our fingers in the wind to-day."

So with enough meat on their platform cache to tide them over the lean days of the spring break-up, when the melting snow balls hard between the toes of the tortured dogs, compelling the use of moccasins; and travel by snow-shoe and sled is prolonged agony for husky and man, the boys turned back to inspect their traps and move the main camp to a place of greater safety.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STALK OF THE DEAD

THE day following, as the vanished sun rimmed indigo ridges with red and gold, tinting the white reaches of lake and muskeg with rose, the dogs were stopped a mile back of the main camp.

"We tak' no chance, dese day. Dose peop' not ambush us eef Gaspard Lecroix can help. I go an' have a look."

"Right enough! But I'm going too."

The hunters wired the team to trees, then, separated by a hundred yards to block a possible surprise from hidden enemies, started a complete circle of the camp to cut any approaching trails. They had nearly completed their circuit, and were close to the decoy trail, made weeks before by

Gaspard, when the half-breed, who was ahead, walked swiftly forward and stopping, bent over the snow; then raised his hand and beckoned to Brock.

"What is it? See something?" whispered the younger boy, as he joined the other where he knelt, studying the snow in the thickening dusk.

"One passed here and did not return," muttered Lecroix.

"We've almost circled the camp without seeing his trail, he must be there, waiting for us."

"Ah-hah!" agreed the other. "He wait for us."

First, the two, again widely separated, cautiously completed the circuit. No strange trail led from the camp. He was there. Hidden in some thicket of young spruce, near the tent, lay a Cree with a cocked rifle, waiting.

The forest was purple with dusk as the two friends agreed on a line of action and started their stalk. He had hidden himself — this unknown enemy — to shoot them in cold blood. Merciless as a lynx watching a rabbit run, he was waiting for their return from their trap-lines. They would show him equal mercy.

"Why not get Yellow-Eye and Flash? They'll smell him out," Brock suggested.

"No!" had been Gaspard's decisive answer. "Een de dark, de dog weel yelp and warn heem,

and he get away. Eef dey jump heem he might shoot or cut one wid de knife. You lak to hurt your pup?"

"Of course not, but I believe those two dogs would get to him — tear him to pieces in the dark, before he had a chance to swing a gun on them. He can't see to shoot."

"Mebbe, but we need dose dog. I hunt dat Cree."

So they started, a hundred yards apart, to follow the trap-line trail in to the camp, for the one in ambush would wait, now, to shoot by the light of the fire of the returned hunters and would lie close in. Through the dusk fast sifting through the timber, silently as the winged, grey death of the northern forests drifts through the tree tops on his nightly patrol, glided two dark shapes. Swiftly the twilight died. Stars pricked out overhead.

Fifty yards from the camp the moving shadows faded into black patches of scrub. For a space there was no movement in the soundless forest. Then something stirred. Through an opening a finger of starlight for an instant touched a flitting grey blur, which dissolved into the murk. An hour passed and the forest floor beneath the spruce was banked with blackness. Then from a great naked poplar beside the decoy trail floated

the "Whoo, hoo — hoo — hoo, whooo — hooo!" of the horned owl.

Again, the hunting call of the winged assassin of the night broke the tense silence. Shortly, the answering voice of its mate drifted over the frozen spear heads of the black spruce. For a space, the frosted stars glittered above a soundless forest, then, again, the muffled threat to the little people of the snows waked the bitter night.

Shortly, like a ghost, a blur of black crossed the snow of an open space, blue in the starlight, to dissolve in the blackness of a thicket.

"See anything?"

"No," came the whisper. "I hunt every place near de camp."

"Where can he be? He must have seen us — and left."

"Ver' strange t'ing! He got scare."

"Still, we can't take a chance and light a fire."

"No, he come back and shoot, den. Now, we get de dog. Dey weel fin' heem."

"You bet they will! If he's still here."

Suddenly, far in the forest, rose a chorus of wails.

"There they go now; they want their supper," whispered Brock.

Stealing back to where the impatient dogs chafed

and whined at their trees at being thus deserted without food, Gaspard and Brock, each taking two on leash, returned to the hunt.

If their enemy still waited for the return of the hunters and the lighted tent as a target, the dogs would smell him out. Separating, the boys approached the camp from opposite directions, then loosed the dogs.

With repeated pats and whispered commands, "Go get 'em, Flash! Get 'em, Kona!" Brock released the straining huskies who sensed that something was wrong — some animal near the camp they should hunt down in the blackness.

Mad with excitement the two huskies faded into the gloom, yelping at each plunge in the deep snow. Behind them stole Brock McCain, his knife loose in its sheath, his blue fingers gripping his cocked rifle. Beyond the camp, to the east, the thick yelp of Yellow-Eye mingled with the higher voice of Slit-Ear as Gaspard sent them into the murk to hunt down the lurking enemy, and the forest was shortly a bedlam as the excited dogs thrashed through the deep snow yelping as they ran.

For a space, from the direction of the yelping, Brock knew that the dogs were beating aimlessly back and forth over a wide area; then the familiar snarl and fighting roar of Flash, not a hundred yards away, started his blood with a leap.

"Flash's got him!"

Ignoring all caution in his desire to help the puppy who had found the hidden ambush — his tense ears fearing the rifle shot which might mean the death of his shaggy partner — Brock plunged ahead through the gloom, tripping on low bush, caroming off the stiff branches of saplings, in his anxiety to save his dog from the bullet and knife of the hidden Cree.

From three directions the growls of Flash had drawn the separated huskies through the murk of the spruce, yelping as they ran. Then as the floundering Brock neared the spot where his dog was blindly fighting to the death against steel and lead, from the blackness the great husky bellowed forth his pæan of victory.

Reaching his dog with a few strides, Brock fingered the trigger of his gun, thrust forward at a black mass in the snow.

"Flash! You got . . . By the Northern Lights — the bear trap!"

As Yellow-Eye, Kona and Slit-Ear, waking the night as they came, rallied to the call of Flash, Brock struck a match.

With leg gripped by the toothed jaws of the bear trap, set in the decoy trail, lay the crumpled body of a Cree. Knotted in death, the frost-blackened

face grimaced horribly as sightless eyes stared up at the boy who bent over it. The hood of the caribou capote hung in tatters and a sleeve was torn to ribbons, tribute to the slash of his long fangs when Flash had leaped and struck the black shape in the snow, to find it lifeless.

"So we've frozen our hands to stalk a dead man!" muttered Brock with a shiver of mingled pity and loathing, as he thrust his blue fingers inside his coat beneath the arm pits to revive circulation, for the night was growing bitter. Then the excited huskies, followed closely by Gaspard, reached the trapped assassin.

"Ah-hah!" exclaimed the surprised half-breed. "I pass not fifty yard from here w'en I circle de camp, but nevaire look for de trap."

"I didn't think he'd take off his shoes, if one of them struck this trail. But this one did, just as you guessed he would." Brock kicked the snowshoes lying at his feet. "He must have been caught yesterday. In forty below, he'd freeze in a few minutes. Well, this camp is getting too hot for us. We've got to move."

With his knife Gaspard girdled a white birch, and stripping off some bark, rolled it into a torch and lighted it. Then, setting the bark in the snow, he proceeded to examine the frozen Indian who,

while hunting for them on the south side of the lake, had stumbled into the trail and followed it, to shoot them in cold blood at the camp.

"Dis one ov dem peop' wid de white man, who tak' you?"

"No, I never saw him before," replied Brock, gazing with aversion at the face, knotted in death.

"Dey have many Cree hunting for dem — dese free-trader."

The body was that of a short, middle aged Cree, dressed in the regulation slip-on caribou coat made with the hair outside, woolen trade breeches and leggins. On the feet were smoked-tanned, caribou hide moccasins. The gun which was cocked, was a 30-30 Winchester, commonly used in the country, but when Gaspard drew the knife from the bead-embroidered sheath, he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"By gar!" he gasped, holding the weapon close to the burning birch. "My fader's knife!"

"What? You're sure? You recognize it?" Brock leaned over the man who knelt in the snow, holding the knife with a hand which shook in its mitten.

"Yes; it ees de handle — dis cut here! And de same notch een de blade. He chipped eet on a stone."

For an interval, the kneeling figure of the son of Pierre Lecroix set as stiff as the frozen murderer, anchored to the inexorable vise of steel jaws. Then the small eyes glittered as they met his friend's sympathetic gaze.

"I go nord an' learn from dese peop' een de moon of de crust."

"Yes, old partner, we'll go when the snow grows hard for good sledding. Now, come, let's feed the dogs and our own empty stomachs."

So returning to camp, the friends left the thing in the snow that had come to destroy them — shoot them down ruthlessly from ambush. To Gaspard, these murderers of the father he had loved were as so much vermin. Because they desired the Yellow-Leg country for their own, they had wiped out Pierre Lecroix as one crushes the black-fly on one's face, and now would deal likewise with Brock and him. In the months on the headwaters he had become a fatalist. Never again did he hope to see the Starving River and the people at Hungry House. Some day before the wedges of the returning geese crossed the sky, he would go to join his father — some day, the Cree wolves of these white traders would take toll of Gaspard Lecroix for the men who had so mysteriously disappeared.

But Brock? It was not fair to the friend he loved to draw him into this feud. He had lost no father. He had his life before him — his family at Hungry House, who would wait in the spring for the returning Peterboro. Brock must go home on the March crust with three of the dogs and the fur. With Yellow-Eye, he, Gaspard, would start north, and before the April thaws, before they got him, at the winter camp of the white men, he would learn how his father died — then take his payment.

As he started a fire in the folding stove and put on the kettles to boil, the silent half-breed was thus occupied with his thoughts. Brock fed the dogs and brought in wood, and shortly the roaring folding-stove gave warmth to the snow-banked tent, and the numb hands of the shivering boys filled again with blood. Outside, the surfeited dogs, impervious to cold in their double coats of wool and hair, gnawed contentedly on caribou ribs. Then the hungry hunters attacked the kettle of caribou stew, reinforced with hard bannock bread and steaming cups of tea. And shortly, on beds of spruce boughs, rolled in their warm robes of plaited rabbit-skin, outside the shaggy company blankets, they slept. But beside each, ready to his hand, lay a loaded rifle, uncased. Hidden in thick growth, fifty yards from the tent to east and west, slept

Kona and Slit-Ear — tethered by light thongs, which, in excitement, they would easily snap. Close in, in a snow-hole under cover of a young fir, curled the great Yellow-Eye, unleashed. Inside the tent, was Flash. Sentineled by such keen-nosed, sharp-eared outguards and support, like sleeping troops, Gaspard and Brock had turned in, for no Indian could pass huskies, who sleep with one ear and both nostrils open.

The stillness of the winter night fell like a blanket over the black forest. As the cold increased, contracting limbs of spruce and jack-pine, birch and poplar, snapped like rifle shots. At intervals, from the distant lake, floated the muffled boom of riven ice, split by frost. Overhead, the flaming heavens hung low on the lances of the spruce, while in the north, frosted stars glittered like blue diamonds, through pale ribbons of light that writhed from the horizon where the blue and green and rose-tinted aurora pulsed against a bitter sky.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MOON OF THE BIG WINDS

THE following morning as they pried down the spring with a spruce sapling, freeing the jaws of the bear-trap, and buried the Cree in the snow, Brock grunted with a disgusted shake of the head, "I'm not used to seeing dead people, Gaspard. It goes against my grain. I'll dream about that face."

The half-breed nodded. "Yes, I know. Dey have not kill your fader, and dey onlee try to tak' you alive, dat tam. You do not hate dese wolf lak me."

"Oh yes I do!" protested the white boy, vehemently. "They're probably a bunch of cut-throats from Fort Churchill way, wanted by the Mounted Police, no doubt, and they're going to wipe us out

if they can. I'd kill one in self-defense as I'd shoot a wolf."

Then Gaspard unfolded his plan. "I t'ink eet ovair last night, Brock. We find a good place to hide een de back countree and trap hard ontil de crust ees hard een March den you tak' de fur and t'ree ov de dog and start for Hungree House. Wid Yellow-Eye, I go nord. Eef I come back I go home een de canoe."

The ice-blue eyes of Brock opened in amazement — then flamed with anger.

"What?" he exploded, choking with the emotions aroused by the suggestion of his partner that he take the valuable fur pack and return safely to the Starving while Gaspard sought a sure death in the north. "You mean that? You think I'd leave you to get yourself shot by that gang, while I took your fur and headed for home? What d'y' think I am?"

Gaspard did not meet the snapping eyes of his friend, as he replied:

"I tole your fader I tak' care of you, Brock — bring you home safe. I mus' keep de word wid heem."

"That's all right, but we're partners ain't we? Do partners split up like this when there's spring-hole ice ahead? Does a sure enough partner send

his friend off on the long chance and run home with his dogs and the fur?"

Gaspard opened his arms in protest. "You have fam'lee — moder, fader. I have onlee brodder, and he ees safe wid my oncle. Las' night I hear my fader call. Somew'ere hees bone lie unburied. On de March crust I go fin' out how he die." The deep set eyes of the speaker were misty with tears as he looked pleadingly at his friend.

"And I go with you!" stormed the white boy. "I'll be eighteen then. In the north that's comin' of age. We're goin' north — and we're comin' back! You understand? Comin' back — both of us! I'm not ready to die, by a whole lot, and I won't let you throw yourself away! I'm goin' with you to see you get back!"

Gaspard smiled helplessly as Brock voiced the law of his loyalty. To attempt to dissuade the strong willed Scotch lad was as futile as to try to turn back the roaring Yellow-Leg with the hand.

"You are de good partner, Brock; but why hunt fur, if we bot' go nord and leave eet to de carcajou?" But Gaspard did not argue it further.

The following days the boys spent in moving their camp and supplies miles back, to the heart of a black spruce swamp where a small brook headed, for running water is always preferable to melted

snow for drinking or cooking. But even here their only safety lay in the frequent snow falls which January would bring, for anyone swinging far enough to the south in search of them would cross the trails from their trap-lines to the camp, and follow them in. Still, the young trappers were confident that the mysterious disappearance of three of their men had already struck fear to the hearts of the Crees who were trapping north of Big Yellow-Leg Lake. The names of "Black Jack" Desaulles and Etienne Lecroix were threats to conjure with — had worked their magic or the snow south of the lake already would have been marked by the webbed footprints of more than the two solitary scouts who had gone south, never to return. Still, the day was coming when the red-bearded leader of the free-traders would come south to take his payment for the loss of three of his men. In the meantime, the boys never for an instant relaxed their vigilance.

"Do you know, Gaspard," said Brock when they were settled in the new camp, "I've clean forgot all about Christmas and New Years. It must be January. Where's that calendar of yours?"

Gaspard reached into his clothes bag and took out a roll of the thin, inner bark of the canoe birch. The paper-like sheet of bark was perforated with

columns of small holes made by Gaspard's mending needle, from his kit bag. There were seven holes to the column. And in this manner he had kept accurate track of the passage of the weeks and months since they left Hungry House.

"We move de tent three day back," said Gaspard, taking his needle and making three perforations. "Dis mak' five week from December, first day. Den dis must be fourt' day of Januar' — de moon ov de big wind, as de Cree say."

"The fourth of January! By golly, I'm a dead one!" cried Brock. "Here the hunters have all come in to the Christmas trade at Hungry House — had their New Year's feed and dance, and started back to their lines, and I've never once thought of it. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wal, we bin ver' busy on oder t'ing," chuckled Gaspard, "gettin' lost and starve out — an' watchin' dem Cree."

"You're right there, old pard. We've had a good deal to occupy our thoughts, I'll say. Over west, there, in that blow, Flash and I didn't waste much time thinking of Christmas dinners. Any old dinner was good enough for us — when we got one."

In Kiwedin, January, with its withering winds and frequent blizzards, is a hard month on trappers. New snow fills the beaten sled trails and buries

the traps and bait. The fur bearers are less on the move, and rabbit and lemming and wood mouse lie close until hunger drives them forth. But March was to be a busy month for Brock and Gaspard when they would lift their traps, cache fur and outfit, and start on their dangerous patrol into the country to the north. So, twice a week, throughout the bitterest days of the "Moon of the Big Winds" the boys made the rounds of their traps, steadily increasing the value of their fur packs. Each mink and marten, fox and otter pelt, that Brock brought in meant to the ambitious boy additional credit at the company store on an outfit of his own, Peterboro canoe, dogs, equipment and provisions for the coming winter. By December, they had trapped enough fur to wipe out the "debt" allowed them by Angus McCain in August. But although Gaspard worked hard and successfully at his trapping, he took little interest in Brock's anticipation of their return to Hungry House in the spring and the wonder their rich fur pack would arouse. He was patiently waiting for the Crees' "Moon of the Crust on the Snow," when the dogs could draw provisions for three weeks, cross-country, over the wind-packed and ice-hard "going," in his heart but one hope, one desire — the longing to learn his father's fate.

Slowly the short, bitter days of January drifted past. There were days when the wind, filled with shot-like snow, cut so fiercely in the open places that neither dogs nor men could buck it, for it seared the blackened flesh with frost-cracks and smeared the noses of the huskies with blood. There were days when the wind was dead but the withering air, at fifty below zero, bit into the timber until the forest echoed with the reports of snapping spruce.

There were nights, black as a cavern, when the barbed wind, like machine-gun bursts, rocked the forest, bending the spruce tops like bows, flaying the white valleys with a barrage of snow crystals, in which no man or beast could live. There were nights when the low heavens were aflame with stars and the searing frost gripped the soundless forest like a vise, while the mystic northern lights pulsed and waned. "The Spirits of the Dead at Play," say the Eskimo shamen — at play on the ice fields of the pole.

Under their slip-on coats of caribou skin, with lynx-lined, wolverine-rimmed hoods, the boys wore double shirts of wool and duffle. Outside their heavy jeans, they travelled in hip-high duffle leggins slung from the belt and gartered at the knees, which they removed and dried with their socks, on entering

the tent for the night, thus avoiding the melting snow. Next to their feet they now wore socks of rabbit pelt — minus legs and ears — slipped on, with hair side out while the skin was yet green and damp, and allowed to dry and shape itself to the foot. Worn under wool and duffle socks with mitten moccasins of smoke-tanned caribou, the rabbit made a blister- and frost-proof foot gear. For mittens, they ordinarily wore rabbit skin, with the hair inside, which they made themselves, but in the coldest days, Brock wore over these his elbow-length gauntlets of the summer skin of a young caribou.

But the wind and snow of January, difficult as they made the regular inspection and care of twenty miles of traps, were not without their compensations. All the old trails to and from the camp near the big lake, made by the boys in December, had long since been buried in drift, and the chance of the discovery of their new camp, far in the back country, greatly lessened. Through the mid-winter winds and low temperatures the boys were confident that, because of the hardship in travelling, their enemies would confine themselves to their traps and send no patrols south.

Early in February, a sudden change in the weather to a succession of still, "poudre" days,

as the old French voyageurs call days when the air, shot with minute crystals of frozen moisture, is alive with pin-points of light, drove the restless Gaspard to action.

"Good wedder to travel!" he said one morning. "I t'ink I make a swing back nord and look for sign."

"All right, partner," agreed Brock. "I'm with you. I could travel right through to the main Carcajou — wherever it is — to-day. This air makes my toes itch to move."

"You bettair stay," protested the half-breed, "I go ver' fast."

"Oh, you do, do yuh? Well, you know my legs are longer than they were last winter; I've grown two inches — just measured myself; so I won't hold you back much."

Gaspard still demurred, with sober face. "You are good man on shoes, Brock, if you are heavy. You get faster dis winter — I can see dat, but I go far back to dere lines. I wan' to find w'ere dey winter."

"No, I'm going with you to take care of you. You're too reckless," insisted the white boy. And so it was finally arranged.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT THE DUSK SWALLOWED

Leaving Slit-Ear and Kona loose, and securely wiring Yellow-Eye and Flash, to prevent the fight which would surely follow the absence of the masters, the boys gave the dogs a gorge of caribou and started to circle the upper end of the lake, each carrying in his pack provisions for three days and a rabbit skin blanket. It was a windless morning, with a sun which day by day swung higher and higher above the horizon. As they travelled in single file over the powdery new snow of the last fall, first one, then the other took the lead, for the shoes of the first man sank inches into the dry

underfooting as yet unsettled, and unpacked by the wind. The keen air, sweet with the tang of spruce and fir, cedar and jack-pine, spurred the blood in the veins of the travellers like a tonic. Packs, cased rifles, and axes on backs, with a side swing of their loose arms, through the glorious winter morning the two boys put behind them the first of the white miles of their circle through the country to the north of the lake. And before them, as they hurried, while the bows of their creaking "webs" kicked up puffs of snow, dry as flour, the floor of the forest revealed the history of the nights since the last fall.

Here a spruce partridge had weathered the previous storm, snug in its bed under the snow, to explode with a wild beating of wings at the approach of a hungry fox nosing out his breathing hole. There, the wood mice had mapped the white page with the tracks of tiny hurrying feet, until swift death in the grey blur of snowy or grey owl had dropped like a bullet, to stain the snow with blood. Everywhere the large hind feet of the snowshoe rabbit had marked the snow. Once, with ten-foot leaps, a snowy ermine had followed a luckless bunny to his sure doom; again, the tracker had been the fiercest assassin of the forest, a fisher or pekan; and farther on, a big-footed lynx had lei-

surely loped behind the fleeing "snow-shoe" who would, in time, foolishly circle and through sheer terror, at last give up the flight.

Travelling overland, on his rounds of the ice-shelled fishing water he patrolled — which he reached at rapids which seldom froze — a short-legged otter had scooped with low stomach a channel through the snow. And, in search of their favorite tid-bit, the hanging moss called "old man's beard," a band of caribou had floundered on their way to a swamp of tamarack and dry spruce.

In the windless forest, even in the below-zero temperature, the boys grew hot from the swift pace and loosened their coats, for perspiration in low temperatures means cold and discomfort — even danger — when the dusk shuts in. Before the sun was smothered in a cobalt sky, the boys made camp far to the north of the lake.

"Which way do we head, to-morrow?" asked Brock, when he had cut a huge pile of birch for the night fire. "We must be twenty miles north-west of the lake and we haven't put our eyes on the sign of a trail."

"Nord, we go to de headwater of de Carcajou."

"But we don't know how far the lakes are!" demurred Brock, "and we've got only two days' more grub."

The half-breed smiled grimly at the husky boy, who dreaded an empty stomach. "We strike Carcajou water to-day, mebbe, den we circle one day east and den back sout' to de lak'. We onlee starve de las' day!" chuckled Gaspard as Brock's frost-burned face pictured his dislike of a supperless camp on the fourth day of the scout.

"Well, all right," grumbled the fast growing boy whose appetite was a standing joke with his partner, "I can stand it two — three days, if we strike something."

"Dat ees why I go nord, to-day — to strike somet'ing."

"Well, we'd better keep our eyes open or something'll strike us."

Daylight found the scouts headed for a low ridge which lifted from the flat country in which they had camped. As they reached the wind-hammered, dwarf spruce on the shoulder of the hill and stood in an opening offering a view into the white north, Brock gasped in surprise: "By the great horned owl, there she is! This must be the divide!"

Reaching away before them shimmered mile after mile of white lake surface, guarded by black ridges of spruce and jack-pine from which the wind had brushed the snow.

Gaspard turned with a nod. "Carcajou water,

for sure. Dis ees de divide," he said. "Eef we follow de outlet down stream, we walk straight into de camp of M'sieu' Redbeard, eh?"

"Oh yes, in a hundred miles or so," laughed Brock. "We'd probably find that schooner we saw in August, warped up on the shore at the mouth. But don't set your heart on travelling beyond this lake, this trip. I don't intend to starve for more than one day."

Taking his glasses from the pack, Brock searched the glittering shell of the big lake which, molded by recent wind, rippled from the north in endless drifts, like a white sea.

"I can't make out any signs of a trail down there," he said and handed the binoculars to Gaspard.

For a space the half-breed studied the shores of the lake, then Brock saw the taut muscles of the mouth of his friend relax in a gesture of surprise.

"What is it?"

"Dere ees a trail down de east shore 'bout t'ree mile."

"By golly, they're trapping here, then! You sure? I couldn't see a thing, those drifts streak the whole lake with lines of shadow."

"Dat ees why I know," replied Gaspard, the glass still at his eyes. "Anoder shadow cross dees

drift shadow down de shore. Eet ees long thin line — a sled trail."

Then Brock looked through the glasses. "Yes, you're right! I see it now, by that long point of black spruce," he agreed. "I'll bet they've got a line of fox traps along that shore. What shall we do?"

"We work down dat shore back een de bush."

First, both boys wound the inside of their snowshoe bows, where they alternately slid over each other, and at times make a click of wood on wood, with narrow strips of raw caribou hide or "babiche," to muffle the sound. Then they drew their rifles, slung on their packs, from the skin cases which protected them from the snow, and carried them in their mittened hands. They had left no-man's land and reached the enemy's country. Anyone crossing their trail would follow them up. Their lives now might hang on the slightest mistake.

So, on reaching the black timber of the eastern shore of the lake, they separated and travelled abreast, a hundred yards apart; near enough to support each other, immediately, in case of trouble, but too far apart to be caught in the same ambush. The warning which should mean danger or a discovery of importance, was to be the "eek-eek," of

the willow ptarmigan; the rallying call for help, the squawk of the horned owl.

So, with cocked rifles in the hollow of the left arm, ready for swift use, eyes roving in a circle, the two stole noiselessly through the cover of the spruce down the lake shore, stopping by agreement, every quarter mile, to listen.

Where the point they had seen from the ridge began to make out into the lake, Brock, a little in the rear, owing to the thickness of the scrub spruce, heard a faint "eek-eek!"

"He sees something!" muttered the excited boy, turning and making his way noiselessly toward the lake shore.

There, waiting in a clump of small spruce, he found Gaspard.

"Look!" said the half-breed.

Fifty feet away, a well beaten trail, over which a sled and dogs had recently passed, as evidenced by the condition of the last light fall of snow, ran to the lake.

"They're hunting east of here for sure; what'll we do?" whispered Brock.

"Keep on nord, to-day."

"Why not wait here, and pick him up?" demanded Brock.

The black eyes of Gaspard twinkled. "Because he pass here dis morning."

"This morning? What makes you think he went west instead of east? The sled killed a chance to see a foot-print. He's walked the trail here without his shoes — that's clear, but when?" whispered Brock, as they went to the ice-hard trail which revealed no tracks.

Gaspard pointed to a young spruce leaning over the sled path. "See dat twig! Eet ees pushed and broke toward de lak'. Eef he pass east, de las' tam, he push eet de odder way."

"By golly, you're right!" muttered the white boy, convinced by his partner's wood-craft. "He had to go that way, and it had to be this morning for it snowed an inch here last night, and the sled's packed down the snow."

So, through the morning, the scouts worked down the lake. Not daring to boil the tea pail because the smoke of a fire would lift, to hang like a "tell-tale" above the tree-tops, in the windless day, at noon, they ate cold meat and went on. But except for the lake trail which they paralleled, back in the forest, the snow of the enemy's country lay unmarked. But, gradually, through the day, the sky had thickened, a curtain of haze slowly masking the sun. At noon, through an opening in the timber, Gaspard looked long at the north, then said with a nod of his hood, "Snow — soon!"

In an hour the northern sky was the color of lead, but there was no wind. In the thick bush in which the boys slowly travelled, the snow went purple under the slanting shadows. Suddenly from the lake shore Brock heard the low squawk of the horned owl.

Danger!

Swiftly on noiseless shoes he moved out of the shadows to the rim of the timber, eyes and ears strained, right mitten swinging from his neck by its thong, right hand fingering the trigger of his cocked rifle.

A low "Eek-eek!" drifted to his ears from a clump of scrub. "Ah, he's not in trouble!" thought the boy.

In the scrub he joined Gaspard.

"Look!"

Following the pointing mitten, Brock saw, miles away, a dark spot on the lake trail.

"Dog-team!" said Gaspard.

"Which way're they headed?"

"Dis way — hard to tell — we see in leetle space!"

So, from the cover of the shadowy spruce, the two watched the spot far down the white-surfaced lake.

"He's coming this way, Gaspard!" said Brock, holding his glasses. "He's passed that point!"

"Yes, he travel up-lak'. Eet snow soon. W'ere he goin' camp?"

"We'll get him there — at his camp — but the dogs! They'll smell us!" muttered Brock doubtfully.

Without replying, Gaspard rose and tested the almost motionless air with bare hand. "W'en de snow start dere weel be little air — not much, from de nord. De dog not smell us here. We wait. He weel turn into de timber, soon."

"Look here, Gaspard," insisted Brock, anxiously, "we're going to capture this feller for information — then let him go? Of course we've got to protect ourselves if he fights — anything goes wrong."

Gaspard's face hardened. "We tak' heem back to camp wid us. Dis tam I hear w'at dey did to my fader."

"All right then, he won't be hurt if he behaves; that's agreed?"

"Ah-hah!" assented the half-breed who watched the north with knotted brows.

Up the lake trail crept the dog-team. Evidently the huskies had travelled hard — were tired; for the glasses clearly revealed that the dogs were walking, and the driver riding the sled. The last light from the sun faintly filtered through a smother of lead-hued cloud, as the north blackened, then

greyed, with the coming snow. Still the dog-team plodded up the lake.

"W'at de matter wid heem?" rasped Gaspard. "He not make camp, soon, we loose heem een de snow."

"He may be making for a camp, up-lake, where we struck the trail," suggested Brock. "By golly, we've got to make camp, too — in the dark."

Gaspard turned a sober face towards his friend. "You not hungree, Brock?"

"Hungry? I could eat a caribou!"

"Wal, you eat to-morrow," was the laconic reply.

Two miles away, the dog-team moved at a walk toward the watchers in the spruce. Gradually, like a rolling fog, banks of shadow crept from the black shores out over the grey-surfaced lake. Then, like a curtain, the snow swept up the lake, wiping the approaching team from sight as water swallows a flung stone.

"By gar! Dat man ees crazee!" stormed Gaspard, in his disappointment. "We go out on de trail an' get heem dere! We loose heem eef we don't."

In the pitch-like gloom which now blanketed the lake, the dog-team might pass them in silence. It was the only way. So, walking out over the

packed surface until they found the trail by the feel of their shoes, they cautiously started down the lake in the murk, separated by a hundred feet, the trail between them.

Neither of the hunters had any doubt of the success of their plan. The huskies, of course, would smell them and start yelping, but they would close in on the surprised driver — afoot or on the sled — with nothing but his skinning knife for defence. His gun would be cased, on the sled, therefore useless. A gun butt jambed on the noses of the dogs, trapped in their harness, would, even if they showed fight, swiftly reconcile them to new masters. And Indian dogs were generally cowards. So Gaspard and Brock had planned, before starting the stalk.

For a half hour, the moving ambush stole through the softly falling snow, for there was no wind. Then, meeting, held a council of war.

"He's gone ashore or we'd have struck him," whispered Brock to the blurred shape of Gaspard whom he could touch, but see only because of his sheathing of snow.

"Yes, he went ashore w'en de snow come. We keep on and find hees trail."

Slowly, in single file, the hunters continued on the shore side of the lake trail. Then, after a short

space, Brock stumbled into the crouched figure of his partner.

"Eet ees here!" said Gaspard.

With his mittens Brock felt the gouge of the swinging toboggan sled in the wind-packed snow, where it turned shoreward. Alone he would have missed it.

"We got him now! He'll have a fire deep in the timber!"

"Ah-hah!" And they turned through the grey murk toward the shore.

Up over the lifted and broken shore-ice they followed the sled trail into the spruce.

"We'll see his fire before the dogs smell us; then we'd better rush him before he has a chance to get at his gun."

"No!" came the sharp objection. "Een dis snow de huskie not smell us ontil we are ver' close. We have a look, first, up-wind."

They were passing through some young fir when Gaspard suddenly seized Brock's arm.

"De fire!"

In the distance a faint patch of yellow, like the flicker of a candle, spotted the murk.

"Ah-hah!" muttered the crouching half-breed, as Brock peered over his shoulder for a clear view.

"I can't see! What is it?" whispered the other.

"By gar! Good t'ing we miss dem!"

"Why? What d'yuh see?" insisted the curious Brock, sensing something startling and unforseen in his friend's manner.

"*Dere are four Cree at dat fire — mebbe more.*"

"Four Indians? By the great horned owl!" gasped Brock, craning his head for a clear view of the distant camp.

"Ah-hah!" muttered the disgusted Gaspard. "Dat ees why he travel so late on de lak'. He head for dat camp."

For a space Lecroix was silent as Brock watched through the falling snow the distant splash of firelight which had now become a menace to the two who looked; then he thrust his face close to the crusted hood of his friend.

"We go up close to dem; we can shoot all but one and tak' heem wid us," he said, hate in his tones. "Some day — dey shoot us."

The mighty grip of Brock's steel fingers shut on Gaspard's arm. "I'll sneak up with you and have a look — but I won't stand ambushing them. I can't do it — even if they're hunting us."

"But dey keel my fader, lak dis — at hees fire!" protested the other, desperately.

"Partner, we're crazy to do it, with those dogs there, but I'll go up closer with you," replied Brock.

"I'm with you, heart and soul — but no shooting unless they catch us!"

"All right!" And a sigh of bitterness escaped Gaspard as, with rifle crooked in his left arm, and his knife loose in its sheath, he started to approach the camp-fire.

It was a rash move to make — this approach of a camp with huskies — but both boys were curious to see what these hunters looked like. They had travelled far to learn something of the ruthless servants of the white traders — and here was their chance.

Noiselessly they worked their way into what slight movement of air there was, to avoid betrayal by the sleeping dogs. And they knew as well, that the falling snow would greatly dilute their scent. At fifty yards, down wind, they should be safe.

At last, side by side, they crouched in the thick timber, with a good view of the fire. The brush wind-break, roofed with snow, faced them. One man was cooking the supper while the others occasionally rose from where they sat on the bed of spruce boughs to turn their drying foot-cloths and duffle socks, hung on sticks near the fire.

The night was mild for the north, well above zero, and the Crees had thrown back their hoods, loosening the sashes of their capotes, for comfort near the heat.

The lean face of Gaspard relaxed in a smile; his eyes glittered as he whispered into Brock's ear: "Eef de dog smell us now, onlee de cook can travel — de oders dry dere foot gear."

But, notwithstanding, two 30-30's were lined through the murk on the figures in the yellow glow. Two boys, muscles tense, nerves strung like bow-strings, as they watched, listened with alert ears for the challenge of a suspicious husky, wakened from his sleep by the warning from his nostrils of a strange scent in the air.

After a space the tension eased, and Gaspard whispered: "Any of dese de men you fight?"

"Two, the one I licked and —"

From somewhere outside the radius of the fire-light a low growl, followed by the warning challenge of an awakened husky, split the gloom of the spruce.

Out in the blackness, two rifles suddenly set in mittenless left hands; two steel tubes, whose sights were useless in the gloom, covered the figures at the fire.

"Don't shoot — wait!" came the guttural command beside Brock's ear.

Swiftly, the awakened dogs of the team filled the forest with their yelps. But the thicket of fir, fifty yards from the fire, vomited no double flash of exploding rifles.

"You crazy fools!" Squinting into the blackness, the cook at the fire called in Cree to the dogs. "Quiet, now. What you smell — wolf?"

"Eef de dog come — alone," muttered Gaspard to the tense muscled Brock, crouched, with elbow on knee, to steady his aim, "we tak' dem wid de knife. At de fire de Cree are blind."

Reaching behind him, Brock moved the sheath of his knife nearer his right side, his heart pounding under the strain of inaction. He could hear the dogs thrashing around in the brush near the fire, snarling at the unknown enemy, yelping their fears, but not getting the direction of the scent.

Still the Indians went on with the drying of their clothes, occasionally calling to the dogs to keep quiet.

"De dog are scare to leave de fire — for wolf. Onlee de one smell us. He ees scare to come."

"We'd better get out," whispered Brock. "I won't fire into that camp unless I have to."

An Indian rose and stood between the fire and those who watched, his figure silhouetted as if cut from black paper. He called to the dogs.

"Go on, you! Catch de wolf!"

Encouraged, the huskies beat about the camp, plunging through the deep snow into the wall of blackness, shortly to return.

"Dey find us — eef we stay. We go!" commanded Gaspard, his rifle lined on the black shape at the fire, his nervous forefinger playing with the trigger.

Noiseless as the muffled flight of the snowy owl was the retreat of the stalkers to the lake shore.

"De dog no good — scare of wolf!" grunted Gaspard with contempt. "Flash and Yellow-Eye hunt us out quick!"

"Gee, but that was a tough wait!" exploded Brock. "All I could do not to fire when that husky smelled us — but I didn't want to shoot, it's too cold blooded."

"We had dem, for sure!" grunted the half-breed. "We could get dem all before dey left de light."

There was still no wind, but a few inches of new snow, and the night not cold, so the boys kept on up the lake. Walking the trail which they followed by the feel of their feet, they continued until it swung in to the shore where they had first seen it. Slipping into the shoes they carried on their backs, they continued for a mile, then went ashore into the thick timber, where, with the greatest difficulty, in the gloom, they gathered and chopped enough wood for a small fire, ate ravenously, and slept.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SPRUCE SPEAKS

"WAKE up dere! You sleep all day?"

From the one hundred and eighty pounds of growing boy buried in the rabbit skin robes by the fire in the snow-hole, came groans of protest.

"Go on! Lemme sleep — a minute — will yuh?" grunted the heap on the spruce brush by the fire, which lit the dusk-filled timber circling the camp. Above, the rear-guards of the stars dimmed before the blue dawn.

Again the dark shape, squatted before the small fire on which bubbled a small tea pail, changed the

frying pan heaped with sputtering caribou steak to his right hand while, with his left, he reached back and pulled at the feet of the one who protested.

"We got to leeve here, Brock! De snow stop een de night; de dog find our track near de camp and dey see somet'ing walk de trail — onlee few inch snow ovair eet."

"Ugh-huh! You're right — as usual!" With a final groan of protest Brock rolled from his warm robe. "Stopped snowing, eh? By golly they'll be after us — unless they're too scared with what they see. Kind of startle 'em to learn they were watched last night, eh?"

"Come and get it!" announced the cook.

"We sure got two good reasons for travelling to-day," said Brock, stretching. "Gee, but that was hair-raising last night! Lucky we didn't rush that camp, eh?"

Washing his hands in snow, Brock hungrily attacked the caribou steak which he washed down with great drafts of hot tea.

"I t'ink dey are too scare to follow — to-day, but we travel hard just de same," said Gaspard.

"You bet, we've got to, to hit camp day after to-morrow. I hate to think of starving on rabbit the last day out," mumbled Brock through a

mouthful of meat. "We head about south-east to hit the outlet — don't we? This lake must be full forty miles north of the Big Yellow-Leg."

"Not so far, but we see plenty trap-line to-day, I t'ink."

"Well, we played in luck last night. Suppose we'd kept on thinking we had one surprised Indian to round up and blundered into that camp full of Crees, eh? What're they huddling together that way for? They can't trap much country doubling up like that."

Gaspard's expressive, dark features lit with a smile. "Wal, I t'ink dey have fear of 'Black Jack' Desaulles and Etienne Lecroix. You scare dem hard w'en you tell dem dat storee."

"I believe you're right. Three of their scouts have disappeared — been swallowed up — not a trace of hide nor hair left of 'em. It's put the fear into them, tough as they are. That's why they bunch together — for sure."

"We geeve dem more to talk about t'ru dis moon."

"What d' yuh mean?"

"Hurry up, I show you."

As the eastern horizon lit with pearl and amber and rose, from a thicket of willows where the lake trail cut the shore, Brock watched. Behind him

in the forest Gaspard stood beside a spruce from which the lower branches had been lopped, working with a pointed, charred stick at a white blaze slashed with his trapping axe. At his side in the snow crackled a little fire of dry spruce.

Shortly, Gaspard called, and Brock who, from his position, commanded a view of the lake trail for miles, joined his partner.

"Let me see, now, if I can read it," said Brock, as he puzzled over the syllabic character writing of the Crees, burned black into the white tablet of the peeled spruce.

"*Cree camp — four men — below here — Black Jack — five sleds — at little pond. Etienne.*" slowly translated Brock. "Great glory, Gaspard, that'll run 'em out of the country!"

"W'en dey see dat, dey head for de coast, eh?" laughed the crafty half-breed. "I geeve dem good scare w'en dey hear Black Jack ees on dere trail wid five dog-team."

"That's a great idea! Unless the wind rises they'll know that somebody's walked the lake trail, last night, in that snow. Now, instead of following us up to-day, they'll likely quit trapping and carry the news to that white man I got my hooks into, and the big boss at their main camp. You're a genius, old pard. Put 'er there!"

The grinning friends shook each others' mittened hands. Gaspard's stratagem was indeed a flash of genius, for five sled teams meant at least ten men on the trail of the free-traders' Cree servants. The news that five sled teams of Provincial Police were in the country should cause a speedy stampede north if — they didn't smell a rat in this bold message left on a travelled trap-line trail.

"Of course," said Brock, "they may spot this for just what it is — a bluff."

Gaspard nodded in agreement. "Dey t'ink eet ver' strange for sure, but dey weel have worry just de sam', I know dem Cree."

Gaspard's Indian blood enabled him to read only too well the mercurial and superstitious mental makeup of his mother's people — to know their weaknesses and value their sturdier qualities.

"Well, let's go, we've got a long day ahead," said Brock. "I'll take a last squint at the lake trail to see if they've started this way." Returning from the shore, he said, as he slipped his feet into the thongs of his shoes and followed Gaspard into the south-east, "No sight of 'em yet, they're a lazy crew."

Through quiet February days the two snowshoed through forest and scrub, over ridges and around ponds; sometimes, for miles, following the

convenient thoroughfares of deadwaters and streams, but they avoided crossing all lakes and barrens. These they circled, for on open lake or muskeg they could be seen for great distances. But, to their surprise, they crossed no country trapped by their enemies. Evidently the mysterious disappearance of their friends had aroused in the trappers of "Red Beard" a wholesome dread of the Yellow-Leg Lake watershed. Nevertheless, not for an instant did the canny Gaspard relax his vigilance as the two travelled south-east in the direction of the outlet of the big lake. Frequently through the day, while Brock kept on, the half-breed buried himself in a clump of spruce or fir to watch the back trail. If there was a bold and shrewd enough man in the camp they had seen at the lake, the boys would be followed. Gaspard took no chances.

But late in the afternoon, far south of the divide between Carcajou and Yellow-Leg water, when the leg-weary snow-shoers were beginning to look for a good camp-site, and their clamoring stomachs chiefly occupied their thoughts, Gaspard, a hundred yards to Brock's left, suddenly stopped with raised arm. Hurrying to his friend, Brock's eyes swept the snow in front of them for the cause of the gesture.

"Look!"

At Gaspard's feet ran a settled trail filled with new snow but plainly distinguishable to a bushman.

"Dey not use dis in some day — since de las' snow."

"You mean the one before last night's fall?"

"Ah-hah," nodded Gaspard. "We follow it a piece."

They had travelled a mile, single file, when the half-breed who was ahead stopped and pointed.

Fifty yards away was a snowed-over, brush lean-to trapping camp, similar to those Gaspard and Brock had built at the far end of their own trap-lines. As the boys reached and curiously examined the abandoned camp covered with a foot of new snow, with an exclamation Gaspard suddenly walked up the trail and stood looking at a blazed spruce.

"Listen to dis!" he called to Brock who was scraping away the snow from the fire-hole of the camp. Brock quickly joined his friend, who read:

"*Antoine not come back. I wait ten sleeps. If I stay dey weel find me here. I go to Beeg Carcajou.*

Leetle Jacques."

"Ah-hah!" grunted the half-breed with a shake of the head, his deepset eyes glittering in satisfac-

tion. "Antoine weel not come back — ma fr'en'. Antoine put hees foot een de bear-trap."

"By the horned owl, Gaspard!" exploded Brock. "They must have made this camp to hunt us from. He didn't stop to hunt for his partner — this Little Jacques — but made tracks. Not much like a partner I've got." And Brock slapped the wiry Gaspard affectionately on the back.

Two days later they were back in their camp south of Big Yellow-Leg.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FIGHTING FURY OF THE WOLVERINE

THROUGH February, or Mikisiwipisim, the Cree Moon of the Eagle, there was little rest for the two trappers who were daily adding to their fur-pack. In the timber the snow had settled and in the barrens, the wind had hammered and packed it, greatly improving the sledding. Every two days now, Brock made the circuit of his lines with Flash. The fur was not so prime as in the early winter, but,

after the winds and blizzards of January, foxes and lynx were travelling more, fisher and marten extending their ranges, and the otter seeking new fishing water which he entered at the broken ice of falls and rapids.

Often they found their traps sprung and bait eaten by thieving squirrel and whiskey-jack. Sometimes the talons of the horned or snowy owl marked the snow around a pilfered trap; and once, a lynx trap held the legs and feet of an imprisoned "snowy" which a plundering wolverine had calmly torn to pieces. For ten days this carcajou baffled the ingenuity of Gaspard and Brock. Time and again, with an uncanny shrewdness, he avoided the traps buried in the snow beside baited fisher cabanes and lynx sets; but in the end he fell victim to his own cunning. For, one night, in the act of tearing down the rear of a fisher cabane, to avoid passing the trap set in front of the bait, he stepped into the circle of traps buried in the snow by the boys in anticipation of this very maneuver.

It was a veritable demon of fury and savage desperation that Brock and Flash found waiting them, one quiet morning. As he watched their approach, the evil, red eyes of the trapped carcajou flamed with hate. Crouched in the snow, his rust-

brown hair stiff on neck and back, his powerful forelegs, armed with scimiter-like claws which would rip a wolf's pelt into ribbons, ready to strike, the Injun-devil lifted his hairy lips from the most feared teeth in the forest in a warning snarl.

With a roar, Flash started to plunge to the battle with the strange foe who challenged him, but, with a quick movement, Brock had him by the collar.

"No you don't, old boy!" cried Brock, holding his enraged husky, harnessed to the sled, as the crouched wolverine, anchored to the caught clog of the trap, snarled his defiance, his thick forelegs tensed for the double slash of knife-like claws which awaited Flash's lunge. "We need you whole and sound, for March, old partner! You're not going to get sliced up fighting that feller! You might kill him in the end — break his neck; but he'd hurt you for sure, before he died."

So, lashing the maddened puppy, hot for battle, to a spruce, Brock advanced cautiously, with his axe, the head reversed.

Built somewhat on the lines of a small bear, but more rangily, the wolverine, pound for pound, is the strongest beast in the north. To this he adds a fighting fury which commands the respect of all, beasts or humans, who meet him. The killing qualities of the great tusks, and the savage strength

of the Ungava, might overcome the flying knives of the carcajou's feet, but Brock had no intention of seeing the slate-grey mane of his puppy smeared red with slashes which, if they did not kill, would cripple him for weeks. In usual hunter fashion he would stun and kill the wolverine with the axe.

Cautiously, with axe poised for a quick blow, he moved in on his shoes, measuring with his eyes the length of the chain on the snow when straightened by the leap of the trapped beast. But the carcajou did not spring and thus open himself to the blow from the menacing axe. Instead, his smouldering red eyes followed the circling Brock, his body slowly pivoting to face his enemy.

Again and again Brock tried to lure the beast to leap to the end of the chain, within range of the poised axe, but with uncanny instinct the wolverine refused to spring.

Provoked at his failure, Brock turned to get his gun from the sled and, with risk of injuring the pelt, shoot the brute, when he had an idea.

"By golly! I'll poke him into it with a stick!" he cried, with a doubtful look at the plunging Flash struggling to free himself from the raw-hide which held him to a neighboring tree. So, cutting and trimming a sapling, Brock again approached the fifty pounds of living dynamite, that watched him, head lowered, lips curled in a red snarl.

With a cough of rage the carcajou crushed the extended pole in his jaws, and with a twist of his head tore away a foot of the spruce stick.

"Mad, eh?" teased Brock, thrilled with the excitement of baiting the most savage denizen of the forest. "I'll make you jump yet!" And the boy fiercely prodded the hairy body.

With a scream the infuriated beast stiffened and sprang into the air. Dropping his pole, Brock leaped back beyond the radius of the chain. As he did, the taut chain jerked the wolverine to the snow. Stepping in, Brock swung the lifted axe, but again the beast left the snow, and axe and hairy body met in mid air with a thud.

As the boy struck again, the carcajou again leaped, tearing his hind foot free of the trap while the axe head buried itself deep in the snow. Springing back, Brock shielded his head with raised left arm as the maddened beast hurled himself upon him.

The shoulder and back of the skin capote were slashed like cloth, as the long skinning knife of the boy plunged deep into the ribs of the raging beast. Again Brock thrust desperately under his upraised arm at the demon whose teeth gripped the back of the skin capote while razor-like claws ripped the hide to ribbons. Then, a great body catapulted

into battling carcajou and boy, hurling them to the snow.

Struggling to his knees, free of his enemy, with smeared knife blade aimed for a thrust, Brock stared at the battle in the snow beside him. In a blurred mêlée of slate-grey and brown, snarling their hate as they fought to the death, thrashed the husky and the wounded carcajou. Hampered by the snapped traces, collar and belly-band of his harness though he was, the charging dog had found his mark as he leaped to the aid of his master. Straight to their goal the great canines of Flash had driven through the thick neck muscles of the wolverine. Desperately the beast, weakened from the knife thrusts, writhed and twisted to reach the husky with the flying flails of his claws. But the tusks of Flash, seeking the spine behind the skull, never lost their conquering grip as they knifed their way to their goal.

Neck clamped from the rear in the vise of the husky's tusks, his cruel jaws snapping helplessly on air as he coughed his hate, the wolverine fought to reach his enemy with his feet, but as he squirmed to slice the great body, always with a wrench, Flash threw him and kept to the beast's back, thus avoiding the slash of the claws.

Then, as the excited Brock hung over the battle

in the snow with poised knife, the rust-brown body suddenly ceased to writhe; the blood-slavered jaws gaped widely in a red grimace, the great fore-feet, with their knives of claws reached out in a last quivering slash at the air.

The long fangs of the Ungava had wrenched through to their mark. The spine of the carcajou was broken.

"Give it to him, Flash!" gasped Brock, suspicious, doubtful of what he saw. "Give it to him, boy!"

Lifting the head of the brute, his teeth still locked, Flash shook him with great wrenches of his iron neck. Satisfied, with a low rumble, he fiercely nuzzled his stiffening enemy. Then with the dead brute between his forelegs, Flash proudly lifted his slant eyes to the master.

"You killed him, boy!" cried Brock, proudly. "You broke his neck — a carcajou's neck — and not a bad slash on you! By the great horned owl, you're a wonder!"

Then, in the custom of his kind, the conquering dog raised his pæan of victory over the body of his foe, in long drawn howls that waked the silent forest.

Throwing off his tattered coat, Brock examined his ripped duffle shirt and the scratches on arms and back.

"Flash!" he cried, "we're two lucky birds! That deer skin was so tough, I'm hardly more than scratched. I got him with that first stab — close to the heart — took the fire out of him, I guess." Brock leaned over and examined the thrusts in the body of the dead carcajou.

"Yes," he added. "And one hind foot was ruined by the trap. If he had had a fair chance to get a purchase with his teeth in my shoulder, he would have slashed my old hide to pieces, boy."

Luckily for Brock the wolverine had hung on his shoulder and side barely an instant — the first snap of his jaws, owing to the thick skin coat, only breaking the skin, and his punishing claws hardly getting into action when the knife thrusts into his lungs and the charge of Flash shook him off. And it was fortunate for Flash he had not met an unwounded carcajou. The neck hold he had got in his leap, had saved him from a ripped pelt.

Finding that neither he nor his dog were hurt beyond painful scratches, Brock donned his torn capote, and hurried back to the main camp to treat the slight wounds on shoulder and left arm, and get his duffle coat.

And so, through February, the boys labored on their trap-lines, unmolested by their enemies north of the big lake, while they added to the already rich catch of fur which might never see Hungry House.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MOON OF THE CRUST ON THE SNOW

ONABANI-GISSIS, the Moon of the Crust on the Snow, was ten days old. Higher and higher, each day, swung the sun over the white wilderness of the Yellow-Leg headwaters. With fur and surplus outfit securely hidden in the cache in the swamp, Gaspard and Brock waited for the usual break in the weather, when, for a time, the March sun would daily soften the snow surface and the following frosts, at night, form a crust which would bear the weight of men and dogs, making sledding a delight. With provisions for three weeks, cooking outfit and blankets, lashed in the tarpaulin wrapper, on the big sled, the first hard crust would find them headed north. Deep into the country the Crees were trapping for the red-bearded free-trader wintering on the lower Carcajou, they were going in search of news of the death of Pierre Lecroix. That

there might be no return south over the March crust; that the Peterboro, slung from spruce, on wires, in October, to avoid the porcupines, might not, in May, run the roaring Yellow-Leg, bound home for Hungry House, the boys fully realized.

Often, in the past weeks, they had gone over it together — this long chance they were taking. Time after time Gaspard had urged Brock to wait with Flash while he went south with the other dogs, on his quest — wait through April, and, if he did not then return, take the Peterboro and ride the snow water behind the break-up of the ice in the Yellow-Leg to the bay and home. But, characteristically, Brock had heatedly refused to "play safe" while his partner flirted with death in the no-man's-land to the north. So, while the surface of lake and muskeg hardened, and the forest floor, which the sun could reach, set into crust, the boys waited. Then, one day, when the weather had changed and the spruce snapped with frost, Yellow-Eye led the dogs into the north. On they went through the day, dogs and sled needing no trail-breaker as in the months past when the snow was young and soft. Now, as the dogs raced down slippery slopes, the boys were compelled to slip off their shoes and dig their heels into the crust while they leaned back on the tail lines left dragging for this

purpose. Otherwise the heavy sled, gathering momentum, would overrun the team and capsize.

The morning of the second day, Gaspard and Brock stood on the ridge overlooking the big lake of the Carcajou headwaters. Carefully Brock examined through his glasses the open country to the north and the glittering surface of the lake.

"The old sled-trail, down the lake, looks snowed over and abandoned, to me," he said, handing the binoculars to his friend.

For a long space the half-breed studied the lake below them.

"Ah-hah!" he announced, finally, "dey keep off dis lake after dey see de message on de spruce, eh?"

"Looks as if our bluff worked," agreed Brock.

"Wal, we don't walk de lak' just de same."

"Lord, no! With the dogs here and the sled we've got to keep out of sight until we spot one of them and get some information."

So the boys followed the timber down to the lake and behind the screen of shore spruce proceeded north. Ahead of the dogs walked Brock, his knife loose in its sheath, for speed in cutting the traces and putting the dogs into the fight, if ambushed; his uncased gun in his left hand. As a flank patrol, travelled the half-breed, a hundred yards away,

eyes roving, ears tense, nerves taut. For they were in the land of a ruthless enemy, who had suffered at their hands, and whose revenge would be sudden, swift as the plummet-like plunge of a hawk, if the boys were caught off their guard.

They found the old trail where Gaspard had burned the fictitious message on the blazed spruce, filled with old drift and abandoned. On down the lake they continued, travelling slowly through the thick timber of the shore, and late in the afternoon, finally made camp.

In a thick stand of spruce the boys dug out a sleeping place and fire-hole. The bitterness of the midwinter nights had passed with the coming of March, but at twenty or thirty below zero, they still needed a warm fire, and had to risk the chance of the discovery of its yellow glow on the spruce. After feeding the dogs, Slit-Ear and Kona were tied well out in opposite directions, while Yellow-Eye lay close in, and Flash, as usual, slept beside the camp.

Soon the stars broke through the violet heavens in a myriad of glittering points and the cold moon swung above the silent ridges. With uncased rifles on the brush beside them, Gaspard and Brock slept before the crackling fire.

For a space the voice of no rover of the night

lifted to break the hush of the frozen forest. Then, from a ridge rose a wail like the cry of a stricken child — to die away, while the frosty stars snapped above the sleeping wilderness. Shortly the wail rose anew, to climax in a scream.

From where he lay in the shelter of some seedling spruce, the deep throat of the wakened Yellow-Eye rumbled. Slit-Ear and Kona stirred beside their trees, lifting their noses from the thick brush of their tails to test the air. Flash rose, shaking his iron body, his black nostrils quivering. But the two shapes in the blankets slept on, oblivious.

Again the freezing air was split by the maniacal voice on the ridge. With a roar of rage Flash sprang to his feet, joining the three dogs in their challenge to the thing out there in the mysterious gloom.

"What's up, Gaspard?" mumbled the waking Brock, throwing back his rabbit-skin robe.

The half-breed sat in his blankets with head tilted to the side, listening.

"Is that a signal? The dogs've gone crazy!"

Rising, Gaspard pulled forward his hood, his ears tense, strained. Brock noticed the rifle in his friend's hand.

The boy kicked out of his blankets. Because of their danger, in case of attack, they slept in their

moccasins that they might without delay leap away from the fire-light and into the protecting gloom.

"No, dat ees mating lynx howling — no signal. But dere ees somet'ing out dere beside lynx," said Gaspard. "We get away from dis fire!"

Thoroughly awake, now, Brock scrambled to his feet, and seizing his gun, joined his friend out in the dusk beyond the fire glow, where a hidden enemy could not find a target. From the timber rose the angry yelps of Yellow-Eye and Flash, beating back and forth. At their trees, Slit-Ear and Kona added to the din.

"You think they're trying to stalk the camp — some of these people?" demanded Brock.

"I don' know. Queer t'ing! Dose dog not howl at lynx onless dey smell heem. Dey can't smell heem on dat ridge — de wind ees wrong."

"From the noise, the dogs haven't struck a trail — they're still beating around."

"No, dey get de wind ov somet'ing, but de wind ees ver' light."

Then the two friends, holding to the indigo gloom of the thickest scrub, worked their way toward the excited dogs who were seeking a trail out near the lake shore. Shortly Gaspard and Brock stood in the shadow of a spruce thicket bordering the

white lake lit by the ash-grey moon and swarming stars. In the timber somewhere below them rose the familiar yelps of Yellow-Eye and Flash, still beating about for a trail of the thing whose faint scent harassed their keen noses. Across the lake rose a long spruce ridge, purple with shadow under the glittering stars.

"There go Slit-Ear and Kona!" whispered Brock. "That raw-hide's too strong. They had to chew it to get away!"

"Ah-hah! We use weaker piece next — Look!" Gaspard suddenly pointed down the lake shore. From the coal-black shadows a grey blur streaked out over the starlit surface toward the opposite shore. Then, after a space, another shape bounded out over the ice, followed closely by a third.

"By gar! Wolf!" muttered Gaspard. "Flash and Yellow-Eye find hees trail!"

Like a grey wraith, out over the moon-bathed lake surface fled the timber wolf, followed by the heavier-built and slower huskies.

"So that was the trouble!" laughed Brock. "Golly, how he can travel! He's gaining every jump!"

With no stomach for a battle with the great beasts that so outnumbered him, the crafty timber wolf was running as only a wolf can run, as he

headed for the forest across the ice. Then Slit-Ear and Kona reached the shore and joined the hunt.

"We'd better turn in and get some sleep — the dogs'll be back soon. They know they can't run that greased-lightning down."

"Ah-hah! We get some sleep, and leave here before daylight. Suppose dose people got camp near here? Dey look for us, for sure."

The stars were still bright when the boys turned out of their blankets to cook breakfast. Curled near the camp, with noses in tails, four tired dogs slept after their futile pursuit of the flying ghost who had approached the previous night, lured by the smell of food.

CHAPTER XXIX

THROUGH THE CURTAIN OF THE SNOW

ALL the morning the dog-team travelled north. At noon the lake narrowed to its outlet, and shortly the boys were following a ridge which paralleled a headwater branch of the Carcajou. But, to their surprise, on inspection, they found that the trail which followed the ice of this little river, had not been used in weeks. Still, the cautious Gaspard held to the timber, rather than travel the easy river road. Once seen from the hills, they could be easily ambushed from the shore, so the team held to the hard and circuitous going of the thick scrub.

All morning they had travelled under a masked

sun, and in the early afternoon the north unfurled its lead-hued banners of the coming snow. In mid-afternoon, to avoid a circle of the shore, Gaspard had followed up the shoulder of a high ridge from which the valley of the stream opened before them for miles. They stopped to rest the dogs, for even with the good going of the hard crust, the five hundred pound load of food, which would carry dogs and men through to April, made rugged hauling on the hills.

While Gaspard smoked a pipe, Brock curiously examined through his glasses the unknown country to the north. How long and great a river was this Carcajou which flowed into the bay to the north-west of Cape Henrietta Maria, no one at Hungry House or Elkwan had known. Whether they were now on one of its headwaters, neither he nor Gaspard was sure. Somewhere to the west of the Carcajou lay the watershed of the great Winisk. This river they followed might swing to the west — might, for all they knew, be Winisk water. But of one thing they were sure. The Crees who hunted this country knew the fate of Pierre Lecroix, and to learn what that had been, was the sole object of this wild adventure.

As the dogs rested, the blanket of grey cloud above them slowly began to fill the air with snow.

Brock had swung the glasses far down the little valley, when suddenly, he exclaimed:

"By golly, Gaspard! There's a dog-team travelling north on the river trail!"

The half-breed sprang to his friend's side. Brock handed him the glasses.

"He wasn't there a moment ago — must be a trail which meets the river somewhere below here!"

For a space, through the falling snow, Gaspard studied the black speck on the river trail. Then he returned the glasses.

"You keep on wid de dog," he said. "I go have a look at dat Creé."

With heart pounding with expectancy, Gaspard swung and slid and dodged down through the timber on his snow-shoes, for in timber the crust is fickle and seldom strong. At the river shore, the half-breed abandoned all caution and slipping out of his shoes, took to the ice, for the team he followed was travelling at a trot at least a mile below him. Down-stream ran the tireless son of Pierre Lecroix through the fast thickening snow, rifle and snow-shoes in his hands. At last he approached a sharp turn, and, sure that his quarry was near, cut directly up through a shoulder of high shore to obtain a view of the river below him. Hurrying through the scrub he looked downstream.

"By Gar!" gasped the panting boy, his eyes widening in astonishment.

On the river ice, hardly three hundred yards below, two dog-teams lay in front of their sleds. In a group four men talked, their laughter clearly audible to the hunter watching from the timber.

"He meet dem travelling up-stream," muttered Gaspard. Then the deep-set eyes of the boy opened, as his lips framed the name: "Gros-Pied!"

Gros-Pied, Big-Foot, one of the team of the missing Pierre Lecroix, had risen and stood sniffing the air, as the heart of Lecroix' son pounded in his chest. Yes, it was Gros-Pied. There was no dog marked like him, with that black head and single white sock. He was in the team headed down-river — good! But where he watched Gaspard was in danger from the keen noses of the huskies. He must move back and warn Brock. From where he lay he could kill or wound them all, before they got to their rifles on the sleds, but he wanted an unhurt prisoner. No, he would cut back and find Brock; then, in the morning they would ambush the sled headed south, with Gros-Pied, his father's dog.

The light was going fast as the snow thickened. Brock would already be making camp back in the timber, up-stream. He must find him. To-morrow they would have a prisoner, and then —

After four hours of blind search through the timber below the ridge where he had left Brock and the team, Gaspard saw the yellow glow of the fire.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BATTLE ON THE CARCAJOU

At daylight six inches of new snow lay on the crust and, to the boys, one thing was clear. If they wished to overtake the Indian heading down-river, they would have to abandon the safety of the timber and take the hazard of the river ice. For the new snow in the forest would greatly hamper the dogs with the heavy sled. The team travelling on the level river trail with its hard footing under the surface snow would distance the huskies laboring in the hills.

"We drop down near de riviere, an' I look for heem. He camp wid de oders last night, I t'ink,"

announced Gaspard. "Den, in a piece, we tak' to de riviere, an' I cut ahead an' tak' heem."

"Suppose he's a fighter? You know we want him unhurt, if we're going to learn anything."

"I can wait till he go ashore and boil de kettle. It weel be easee, den, to tak' heem."

So Gaspard went ahead to the river, to reconnoitre, while Brock followed with the team. In a half hour, as the sun rose, lighting the forest, the half-breed met Brock packing the new snow ahead of the toboggan.

"I saw dem start — t'ree, up-riviere; one, our man, go down-stream. Een littlepiece you swing out to de ice and follow me. I go to head heem off. He got no load, he travel fast."

With a wave of the hand, Gaspard was gone.

Carrying his loaded rifle, Brock travelled ahead for a half hour, then angled out to the river, followed closely by Yellow-Eye and the team. The three men bound up-river should now be far on their way, he thought, as he looked out to the ice where the broken snow marked the passage of sleds since the fall of the night before. Stopping the team, Brock went to the cover of some shore willows and looked up-stream. The freshly broken trail ran for a mile and disappeared behind a bend. They were miles away by this time, so returning, he drove his dogs down to the ice and out to the river trail.

With the start of over an hour the Indian in front of him would be far down stream. Gaspard would have to travel hard through the bush to head him off.

Brock was excited. At last they were in the enemy's country — getting some action. Any moment, now, things might happen. The safety of his friend gave him little concern. Gaspard had but one man to deal with — a man travelling with his gun cased on his sled. Gaspard would get his man, unhurt, without a fight. It was the safety of the dogs and the precious load of grub on the sled that occupied Brock's thoughts. For the first time since leaving Yellow-Leg Lake he was travelling in the open, in full view of flanking ridges and the shore. His restless eyes roved in a circle as he led the team down stream. In the crook of his left arm lay his rifle. Somehow, the surmise that, from some of those black thickets of spruce, beady eyes might watch the dog-team on the river, harassed his thoughts. He laughed at the obsession, talking to the dogs as he hurried on the trail of Gaspard and the team ahead.

He had travelled for an hour, when, as he approached a sharp bend in the river, throwing the trail close to a shore, thick grown with scrub, like the lash of a whip a premonition of danger flicked his nerves.

With a fierce, "Haw, Yellow-Eye!" Brock swung the team to the opposite shore, and with a rough "Marche!" led them on the run into the scrub.

He had barely reached the cover of the spruce when the opposite shore roared with the explosion of rifles. A cut spruce twig fell on his shoulder.

"I knew it!" gasped the crouching boy, knife drawn to loose the dogs in case of a rush over the ice.

"Down, Yellow-Eye! Down, Flash! Shut up, Flash!" he rasped, fiercely, as the yelping huskies strained at their collars.

Gripping the traces beside the trembling dogs, mystified by the shots from the opposite shore and the actions of their master, from his cover Brock watched the river ice. He had fooled the people in ambush — once! What would be their next move? For move they soon would.

If he cut the dogs loose, now, they would cross the river, only to meet a hail of lead. No, he must hold them — keep them with him, until he was rushed; if the Crees had the nerve to rush him. Then he'd cut the traces of Flash and Yellow-Eye and show these murderers how two Ungavas could fight. And God help them, if the dogs reached them!

And Gaspard? Had he heard the shots? If he

had he'd back-track on the run and his rifle would soon be singing. But suppose he travelled up the ice straight into range of the Crees in the scrub?

"Down, Yellow-Eye! Shut up, Flash!" Fearing his plunging dogs would snap their traces, Brock unhooked the leader and rear dog and lashed them to separate trees, within easy reach of his knife. Slit-Ear and Kona he left traced to the heavy sled. Then with elbow on knee he lined his sights on the thicket across stream and waited for the flash and blue wisp of smoke from the Crees' guns to give him a target. For he knew that the Indians would not hold their fire.

For minutes the boy held his sights lined on the ambush — but no rifles belched their yellow flame from the green scrub. His eye-brows knotted in surprise. Then, like a flash, he guessed the cause.

The Crees were not there!

They had crossed the river behind the cover of the bend, below him, and were stalking him up his own shore!

With a leap he reached Kona and Slit-Ear and cut them loose.

"Get 'em, Kona! Slit-Ear!" he cried and pointed down stream. Yelping madly the two dogs disappeared. "Down Yellow-Eye!" he fiercely commanded, winding his wrist with the cut traces of

the lead dog. "Shut-up, Flash! Steady, Flash!" He reached the puppy, frenzied with excitement, cut him loose, and gripping his traces with the hand carrying the gun, plunged inland from the river shore.

"When they come, I won't be here!" Brock rasped through his set teeth. Straight back into the thick spruce he forced the raging and bewildered dogs. Reaching good cover, he halted, holding the dogs by will power alone.

Then, suddenly from the direction of the river rose the brittle yelps of Slit-Ear and Kona. They had found the Crees! A rifle crashed — then another.

With a sob, Brock muttered: "If they've shot 'em! They'll pay for it — pay for it!"

His wrists were raw with the plunging of the maddened huskies fast getting out of hand, when he caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark patch moving through the scrub. Loosing the dogs, Brock fired. The dark spot in the distance vanished. Pumping a shell into the chamber of his 30-30, he cautiously advanced, while the great Ungavas roared ahead through the forest to the succor of their comrades.

Brock found the trail of the Indian leading out to the river. He had missed.

Where was Gaspard? Had he heard the firing? Was he coming? Where was Gaspard?

Free of his dogs, Brock started a counter stalk of the men hunting him. Eyes strained, nerves taut, with cocked rifle he followed the trail. Again rifles crashed ahead of him, above the yelps of Flash and Yellow-Eye — and again.

"If they get Flash — my Flash!" raged Brock. In his fear for the valiant dog he loved, he abandoned all caution, and plunged toward the din of battle on the river shore. A wail of a hurt husky followed a rifle shot.

"They're shooting the dogs!"

Then Brock McCain reached the battle in the bush. With a sob, he saw, through an opening, fifty yards away, a great yellow-and-white body stretched on the snow.

"Yellow-Eye! They've got Yellow-Eye!" choked the boy, as he ran, searching the scrub for the smoke of a rifle.

With his rifle covering his advance, Brock approached to where the great dog lay stretched in the snow, head on forefeet. Then the roving eyes of the boy saw a hooded figure swing from the branches of a spruce to the snow, a grimace of satisfaction wrinkling his swart face.

Dropping on a knee, Brock lined his sights as a knife flashed from the Cree's sash and the killer of the king-dog leaned over the motionless shape.

Then, as his forefinger curled on the trigger of his 30-30, Brock gasped. Up from the snow lunged the yellow-and-white shape. The great tusks snapped on the exposed throat of the man bent forward. With a muffled snarl the mighty Ungava bore the Indian to the snow beneath him. Once — twice, the long fangs ripped and tore at the jugular of the stricken Cree whose knife slipped from nerveless fingers.

The staring eyes of the thrilled youth saw the massive head of Yellow-Eye lift from the mutilated shape. The jaws opened. A hoarse rumble vibrated in the deep throat. Then the great head fell limp on the snow.

Standing over him, Brock's blurred eyes saw a great wound in the Ungava's side from which blood welled out to crimson the snow.

Dauntless in death, as in life, Yellow-Eye had joined his fathers.

"They'll pay for this, boy — pay!" sobbed the lad as he hurried on in search of Flash. Somewhere, beating through the bush, Brock heard the voice of his dog. Cautiously now, his eyes swept the trees for a sniper. Then he struck a trail which led toward the river.

Dodging from clump to clump of young growth, he followed. Suddenly a rifle cracked, and, sway-

ing for an instant on his feet as his consciousness faded, Brock slowly crumpled in the snow.

From a thicket twenty yards on his flank rose a low grunt of satisfaction. A hooded shape pushed aside the spruce seedlings and approached the huddled mass on the snow. Standing for an instant, head tilted, listening to the yelping dogs thrashing through the timber, the Indian watched the limp shape of his victim. But the sprawled figure in the snow did not move.

The Cree swiftly advanced. As he moved, the hammer of his rifle clicked as his thumb cocked it. He raised the gun, to shoot again the one already stricken, when a movement in the scrub behind him drew his eyes.

Then through the air catapulted one hundred and forty pounds of grey dynamite to strike the surprised Indian and hurl him to the snow, as the wind tosses a leaf. With a scream the Cree reached for his knife as the white fangs of Flash slashed again and again in demoniacal fury, for he had scented his master and was seeking him, when he reached them.

Frenzied with battle-lust, the great beast ripped and tore at the throat of the helpless man. Then, leaving the stiffening body, crawled, whimpering, to the silent master he loved.

Nuzzling the hood back from Brock's forehead, Flash licked at the red furrow across a temple, his black nostrils quivering in a low whine. But the grey-faced master made no response. The dog worked off a mitten and covered the limp hand with the caresses of a hot tongue. But the fingers did not move in answer. Then, sniffing long at the inert body, Flash sat down and pointing his nose at the sky wailed out his despair and his grief.

After a space, the dog repeated his attempts to arouse the man he worshipped. Then, as if he knew that Brock had left him, lay down close to the still shape, his head on the chest, slant eyes closed to slits, as he breathed his sorrow in low, quavering whimpers.

Later, the guardian of the dead suddenly rose, baring his great fangs in a warning snarl. Wide-eyed with fear, Gaspard found them.

"Brock! He ees hurt, Flash?"

With a side glance at the body of the Indian in the snow, Gaspard hurried to his stricken friend, his grey face set with anxiety. But the hairy bulk of Flash quietly barred his way.

"What de trouble, Flash? You t'ink Gaspard hurt Brock?" And the half-breed stared apprehensively over the barrier of Flash's intervening bulk at the furrow in the forehead of the body in

the snow. Offering no violence, with no rumble of hostility, Flash stood stoically on guard, refusing to share the beloved body.

Gaspard was in a quandary. It was clear Brock had been shot in the head — how badly he could not tell. There was the path of the bullet across the temple. He must listen to his heart! And there stood Flash, barring the way — Flash who had given his love and allegiance to one man, forever.

Sitting down on the snow, Gaspard began to talk and croon to the dog whose heart lay with the still figure he guarded. For a long space the dog ignored him, but, in the end, with rumbling protest, suffered the friend of Brock to touch the still shape.

Then the eager ears of the half-breed listened at Brock's chest. Yes, the heart was beating! The gouge in the temple had not fractured the skull.

Swiftly building a fire, Gaspard returned from the river with a young Cree, his prisoner, whose hands were bound behind him with thong. And with them came Slit-Ear and Kona, whose white shoulder was smeared red from a flesh wound.

Leaving the Cree at the fire, Gaspard found the loaded sled on the shore, and brought it to the fire with the aid of the two dogs, while Flash stood guard beside his master.

Shortly, Brock was wrapped in blankets on a

bough bed, beside the roaring fire fed by the Cree, whom Gaspard had released from his thongs. In an hour the laboring half-breed had revived the circulation in Brock's inert body. Later, the boy, suffering from a slight concussion, opened his eyes and swallowed the steaming cup of tea offered him. With a groan of relief Gaspard cried:

"Brock, you know me, Brock? Gaspard fix you all right, old partner! It ees all right now! He shoot close — dat Cree, but old Flash get heem!"

As returning consciousness lit Brock's eyes, the hot tongue of the friend who had mourned him touched his cheek. Then with a throat rumble of contentment, the guardian of the sleeping Brock settled back, head on paws, for his watch through the night.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE STORY THE CREE TOLD

THE stars still blinked dimly above the camp on the Carcajou and the violet dusk hung in the spruce, when the silence of the still sleeping forest was marred by a long wail. Then a second voice joined the first, and in chorus, a mournful threnody lifted on the freezing air. Shortly, out near the river shore, other voices joined the two back in the timber.

"What dey do dat for?" queried Gaspard, standing near the breakfast fire. "Stop, Flash! You bodder Brock!" ordered the youth, but with nose pointed at the dim stars overhead, the great husky added his lamentations to those of his comrades.

"Onlee two out dere; where ees Yellow-Eye?"

muttered the half-breed, tilted head listening to the familiar voices of Slit-Ear and Kona. "Hey you, Yellow-Eye!" he called.

But the yelp of the king-dog would never again answer the voice of Gaspard.

"Our lead-dog, I cannot hear him!" said Gaspard, in Cree, to the boy whom he was treating as a friend rather than an enemy, for the prisoner's hands were not bound and he squatted by the fire watching the frying pan.

"I saw but three dogs here last night," replied the Cree. "Shall I go to the river and stop my team howling?"

"No." Then Gaspard's face suddenly sobered at a surmise which chilled his heart. "I go see," he muttered, leaving the fire.

Beside the stiffened body of their old comrade of the trails, Gaspard found Slit-Ear and Kona mourning the dead in the manner of their breed. Near them, ignored, the Indian lay rigid in the snow.

"By gar! Yellow-Eye! Poor ole Yellow-Eye!" muttered the boy, sadly shaking his head, as his eyes found the wound through which the life of the dauntless king-dog had ebbed. "You mak' beeg fight — keel heem, aftair he shoot you! Brave ole Yellow-Eye!" Gaspard knelt on the snow and,

dropping his mitten, placed his hand on the great skull, with its bared fangs, and its slant-eyes glazed in death. "You were de good worker and de wise lead-dog — an' you die for Brock and Gaspard. I weesh you plentee rabbit in de Happy Hunting Ground — Yellow-Eye."

With difficulty the saddened boy drove Slit-Ear and Kona before him back to camp. Reaching the fire, he nodded to the Cree. "Shot!" he muttered huskily in the Indian's native tongue. "But he killed the one who shot him."

"Shot!" came a weak voice from the blankets. "What you say? Who's shot — not Flash?"

"No, poor ole Yellow-Eye. Now you be still an' sleep, Brock."

"Yellow-Eye? Game old Yellow-Eye! I saw . . . I saw . . ." Then the dazed Brock slept.

In two days Brock's clouded brain had cleared from the effects of the glancing blow of the bullet across his skull and his strength returned, while Kona's shoulder was rapidly healing. Graphically Brock related the story of the ambush and the fight in the forest with the revenge of the dying Yellow-Eye, which Gaspard's bush-craft had already revealed to the curious half-breed through the map of the snow. Hearing the shots far upstream, while he still followed the dog team of the Cree, Gaspard

had boldly rushed him from the shore, learning to his surprise, that the boy had no intention of putting up a fight. Swinging the team, he had lashed the dogs upstream with the light sled to the aid of his friend. According to the prisoner, who, strangely, seemed overjoyed at his capture, the two Indians who had ambushed Brock, had come from little Carcajou Lake to the east and evidently had reached the river barely in time to discover the approaching team of the white boy. The three with whom the prisoner had camped had not heard the firing or they would have turned back downriver. When Brock learned how Gaspard had found him guarded by Flash, who, in his grief, refused to share his dead, the eyes of the boy winked hard as his hand sought the massive head that lifted with pricked ears as Brock spoke his name.

Then, for Brock's benefit, the Cree repeated in his native tongue what he had already told the greatly excited Gaspard. "My name is Joe Nipissing. In the moon of the mating of the caribou, my brother and I hunted geese on the coast below Fort Severn. One day strange Indians came ashore to our camp from a large boat. With them was a bearded white man who offered us whiskey and asked us to go south to trap on this river, the Carcajou. My brother and I did not wish to go,

but they stole our guns in the night and forced us. Three — four sleeps north, at the mouth of this river, the big white man with the red beard winters with his boat. They have a house of logs where the hunters bring their fur. But those who were sent to the headwaters of the Carcajou have left — all but the three who met me on the river and passed south, three sleeps ago. Three hunters were sent to look for you and did not return, so the others are afraid. They say that a Frenchman called 'Black Jack' is hunting them."

"But your father, Gaspard? Does he know what —"

"He know — he know!" Gaspard's dark features worked under the strain, his eyes glittered with excitement and hope. "He say a Frenchman, a prisoner, ees at de beeg camp. He has not spik to heem, but eet ees my fader! He ees alive, Brock! My fader ees alive! You hear dat?"

Thrilled, Brock wrung his partner's hand. "Golly, that's wonderful news, Gaspard, old partner!" It might be true — this story, thought Brock. Who could tell?

"Who are these people — these white traders? Where are they from?" Brock demanded, in Cree, of Joe Nipissing.

"They came from the west coast. They are bad

men and many of their hunters are hiding from the Red Coats. That is why they are here."

Brock looked at Gaspard. "So the Mounties are after them? A bunch of cut-throats wanted by the Mounted Police!"

"How you feel, Brock?" demanded the other, ignoring the remark.

"Fine! My head's a bit sore but that won't keep me from travelling."

Gaspard smiled. "To-morrow we start, eh?"

"You bet we do. I'll take Flash this morning and strike back into the timber to try my head and limber up my legs."

"Good! Joe and Gaspard got somet'ing to do now."

When Brock had left with Flash to stretch his legs, Gaspard and the Indian scraped the snow from between two boulders near the shore, and putting the body of Yellow-Eye on a sled, drew it to the river. There, later, Brock found them covering the great husky with heavy sticks of spruce that he might rest, inviolate, safe from the profanation of prowling wolf or wolverine — from the teeth and claws of the vandals of the forest.

Then Brock's eyes widened as they rested on a neighboring spruce from which the lower branches had been lopped.

"A lop-stick — for Yellow-Eye!" he exclaimed. "Gaspard, I call this pretty fine of you!" Going to the lop-stick spruce shorn of its lower branches in honor of the heroic husky, Brock read the Cree characters burned into the white blaze by his friend:

"*The lop-stick of Yellow-Eye. He never missed the trail or hung back in the traces. To dog or man he never lowered his eyes. For his friends he died.*"

A lop-stick, the monument and tribute of the north, reserved for the celebration of the deeds of men, had been won by a dog.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CARCAJOU TRAIL TO THE COAST

With Joe Nipissing's team in the lead, carrying on the sled some of the caribou meat, fish and flour, from the heavier load of the boys' toboggan, the next morning they pulled out from their camp to the river shore. There Gaspard stopped the two teams. Facing in silence the lop-stick spruce marking the grave of the Ungava who, in his superb strength and pride had led the dog-team north from the Big Yellow-Leg, Gaspard and Brock raised their rifles and fired the salute to the dead.

"A'voir, Yellow-Eye, mon brave!" called the half-breed in his father's tongue.

"Good-by, old king-dog!" choked Brock. "You were a king — every shaggy inch of you! Good-by, Yellow-Eye!"

As if they sensed the significance of the rifle shots, Flash, Slit-Ear and Kona sat down in their traces, and lifted their noses in melancholy wails.

The teams pulled out to the river trail and the great husky, who never again would lead his comrades into the teeth of a blizzard, never again follow the game trails of forest and muskeg, never again point his nose to the freezing stars as he roared his challenge; whose slant eyes would never again sweep wilderness lakes mirroring the autumn ridges, was left in his grave in the snow.

Bold to the point of rashness, the boys travelled all day on the hard river trail, for they had barely ten days' food for themselves and dogs, and now, Joe Nipissing to feed on the way south, for Brock had promised the young Cree to take him to Hungry House and send him home to his people at Fort Severn, in the spring.

Spring and Hungry House! Brock wondered if there would be any spring and home for those who were headed north — for the den of the wolves.

The second day they passed around a great lake, not daring to hold to the beaten trail; then, with the rising of the late moon, kept on down the river. The country was flattening out, the timber thinning and the shores, gouged by the ice and the spring freshets, lifting into cut-banks and bare cliffs. They were nearing the bay.

Sleeping all the following day in a swamp, the next night found the dog-teams following the scrub of the back country, for the Cree announced that they were nearing the winter camp of the free-trader, "Red" Macbeth.

At daylight, Nipissing announced that the boat and camp of the white men lay not two miles over the ridge, which separated them from the Carcajou. Leaving Brock to feed the dogs and make camp in the cover of the scrub, with Joe as guide, Gaspard started for the river to reconnoitre.

The heart of the half-breed pounded in his chest as he followed the Cree. At last he was to know — to learn whether his father lived — was even now within a mile or two, in the camp of the men he so hated. But why, if he lived, had Pierre Lecroix not escaped? According to the Cree the strange Frenchman was not confined — a prisoner. Nipissing had seen him but once, at a distance, and he was not bound; he was supposed to aid with the trading, the fur, and work around the camp.

If this was so — if this man was the father he sought, there was a mystery behind it, for Pierre Lecroix would never have spent the summer on the Carcajou with these men, while his son mourned him at Hungry House. What was behind it all?

Then Gaspard's dark face knotted with pain.

Could he be hurt — so wounded that he was helpless — unable to travel? But Nipissing assured Gaspard that this stranger was actively working around the camp.

Thus ran Gaspard's thoughts as they travelled through the small spruce of the low ridge to a point commanding the river. Nipissing, in the lead, suddenly stopped and beckoned with his mitten. Joining him, Gaspard followed with eager eyes the arm which pointed. Not a mile away lay the white shell of the frozen Carcajou. On the opposite shore, high above the river ice, stood a schooner, blocked up with heavy spruce logs where it had been warped up from the river beyond reach of the spring freshets. Some distance upstream, rose the white roof and the snow-banked log walls of the traders' camp. From a stove-pipe, black against the white roof, curled the smoke of the breakfast fire.

"Ah-hah!" murmured the half-breed.

"There will be few men there now," said Nipissing.

"How many?" asked the other in Cree.

"Three — four."

"Any dogs?" asked Gaspard.

"No, they are away on the trap-lines."

"Ah-hah!" And the eyes of the half-breed glittered as he swiftly made his plans.

That night, through the murk under a thick sky, three shapes crossed the Carcajou above the camp and cut back from the shore. Approaching from the rear, three hooded figures stopped in the scrub, a hundred yards from where two yellow smears lit the wall of gloom. Then one of the men left the others and faded into the murk. Shortly, Gaspard strained against the log walls of the cabin, beside a window. Slowly he moved his head until he gained a partial view of the interior.

His father! Was he to see the loved face of the man for whom he had come so far? The heart of the youth shook him with its beating. His breath tortured his lungs. Was he in there — Pierre Lecroix — or was it all a grim joke — this tale of Nipissing's?

To his straining ears came voices and laughter. He moved his head farther, and looked.

In a chair fashioned from spruce saplings, sat a hulk of a man with a red beard. Across a slab table, on which stood a bottle and glasses, a swart-faced half-breed studied a hand of cards through close-set, evil eyes.

Instinctively, the one who watched through the frosted window, gripped the gun in his right hand, while his left mitten found the horn handle of his knife. Those men there, who sat at their cards,

drinking, would pay to Gaspard Lecroix! Pay for the father they had taken from him. There, where they sat, he could wipe them out, now, with but two crooks of his finger.

But — was his father there? Presently Gaspard's eyes widened, breathing checked, as another joined the two at the table — but it was not the man he sought.

The man he sought was a servant — a prisoner. He would not sit with the others. The cabin seemed to have one room only, but there was a loft above the large room, for Gaspard saw the ladder leading to the opening in the floor. He moved to the opposite side of the window where the sheet-iron stove would not obstruct his view.

Then his eyes were drawn to the top round of the ladder. A moccasined foot was thrust from the open trap-door and rested on the round. Then a peeled spruce stick passed the foot on the top round — a short spruce stick, followed by . . . the stump — of — a — leg!

Breathless, the one flattened against the log wall in the freezing air, watched the body of the one descending the ladder, sliding, lowered hand under hand. Reaching the floor, the tall figure of the cripple turned, and the light from a lantern lit the bold features of — Pierre Lecroix.

"Fader! . . . Fader!" With a sob Gaspard Lecroix watched the tall figure limp from sight.

Then a wave of grief and rage swept the one outside the window. Stepping back, steel clicked on steel as he threw the rifle to his shoulder and covered the chest of the big man, who sat, ten feet from flaming death. For a space, the steel tube in the murk menaced the unsuspecting "Red" Macbeth, as reason fought with hate for mastery of the emotions of the half-crazed youth. Then, slowly, the gun was lowered and the watcher by the window faded into the darkness.

Shortly Brock was seized by a pair of arms like steel cable. Holding Brock in a bear hug, Gaspard poured out his story.

"He ees dere! He ees dere! I saw heem!" cried the overjoyed boy. "He was hurt! He could not travel! So dey do not watch heem!"

In turn, Brock hugged Gaspard, in his delight at the news. "Your father! At last! Old partner, put it there! Golly, that's great!"

Then Gaspard stiffened. "You know w'at dese peopl' do to heem? Dey tak off hees leg! On hees face ees a beeg scar! My fader!" And the chest of the son of Pierre Lecroix rose in a deep sob.

That night, at their hiding place back in the timber, three men sat long in a council of war.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE VENGEANCE OF GASPARD LECROIX

THE night following, in the blackness of the scrub behind the cabin of "Red" Macbeth, two men waited beside a dog-team. That the dogs might not betray their masters, each was gagged with hide. A half-hour before, a third man had left the two who now waited impatiently for his coming, as they watched the yellow glow of the windows of the cabin. At last, the absent one returned.

"Any trouble, Gaspard?" asked Brock. "You've been away hours."

"Ah-hah! Little troubl'; all right now!"

"What was it?"

"I meet someone."

"Too bad! What shall we do?"

"He weel not tell — *now*."

The grim significance of the answer closed Brock's mouth. He understood.

Then, leaving Brock with the dogs, Gaspard and the Cree disappeared in the murk. With Flash's collar in his mittened hand, while he soothed the dog who resented the strapping of his jaws with raw-hide, Brock strained anxious eyes toward the river shore. At last he saw it.

Gradually, beyond the cabin, the blackness of the night paled. Then, through the murk burst a yellow glow, throwing into relief the dark hulk of the schooner, as red flames licked up over its bilges. *The free-traders' boat was afire!*

Shortly there rose a cry in the night, outside the cabin. "Iskutew! Fire!" And Joe Nipissing burst wild-eyed into the shack.

"Iskutew! De boat burn!" he cried to the startled Macbeth and the grey-faced men who reached for coats and moccasins.

Running to the door, the red-bearded leader stared in dismay at his blazing schooner. Then the three rushed out to the shore.

Turning at a sound, the excited Joe Nipissing saw a tall figure slide down the ladder, open the door

of the great box stove, and seizing a half-burned stick, throw it on the bedding of a bunk. Lunging like a flash on the speechless boy, the steel fingers of Pierre Lecroix closed on his throat.

"The boat go — the shack go!" rasped the Frenchman in Cree. "Where are your dogs?"

But the choking Cree could not explain.

"You understand?" fiercely demanded the other. "We'll load your sled with grub and blankets and make for Hungry House! Quick!" And Lecroix pushed the protesting Nipissing through the door, then turned back into the already burning room for blankets and food. Then to his startled ears came a familiar voice from the door.

"Fader!" And Gaspard had the man he loved in his arms.

For a space, oblivious of the licking flames slowly filling the room with smoke, father and son gripped each other in a fierce embrace. Then, recovering his senses, Gaspard turned with: "The dogs; call Brock! Quick!"

But the Cree had léft the room.

"Brock and I are here with the team," Gaspard explained to the puzzled man who stared at his son in wonderment.

Then the Cree burst into the room, followed by Brock, who wrung the hand of the lost Lecroix.

The shack, now, was burning in earnest. Slipping on capote and mittens, and carrying his rifle and some blankets, Pierre Lecroix followed his rescuers to the waiting sled.

"Marche! Flash!" called Brock to the lead-dog, and they headed up the river shore. Riding the sled while his son ran at his side, Pierre Lecroix left the burning camp of "Red" Macbeth.

As the galloping dog-team swung through the gloam down to the river trail, the flames of the burning schooner turned her masts into fingers of fire thrust upright into the wall of blackness. Around her burning hulk dark shapes ran helplessly to and fro. Then they left her to her fate as the flames, bursting through the windows of the cabin, drew them back to save their provisions and fur.

On went the dog-team into the south, bound for the Big Yellow-Leg, while the hearts of two boys beat high with pride and happiness. Since the freezing moon when the men of "Red" Macbeth had started to hunt them from the Yellow-Leg, they had travelled a long trail. And now they had won — found the father whom the loyal Gaspard could not put from his heart.

Before turning the first bend, the dog-team stopped.

Lighting the river shores, schooner and cabin sent red flames high into the smother of murk. Seizing the hand of his partner, Gaspard said, as his eyes measured the completeness of his revenge on the men who had taken from him his father, "Wal, Brock, I t'ink dat M'sieu' Macbeth ees ver' sad dis night dat he try to run two little boy out of de Yellow-Leg countree."

"He'll be lucky not to starve this spring," laughed Brock.

"He not starve; he has beeg cache," added Pierre, "but he lose de fur and stuff in the shack."

When the team stopped, later, to boil the kettle and rest the dogs, Pierre told them his story.

Ambushed one day, the previous March, he had received a shot shattering his ankle, and in the knife fight following the rush by three Indians, had been badly slashed across the face. Brought, half-dead, on a sled to Macbeth's quarters, Pierre had later amputated his own foot, and not until autumn had he regained his strength.

His knowledge of fur and ability to handle Indians had been put to valuable use by the free-traders, who had not treated him badly. For this reason, alone, he had not killed them in their sleep, but was waiting for spring, to steal a canoe and fol-

low the coast home. But his boy, instead, had come for him. And the shattered Pierre Lecroix glanced proudly at the boy who stood by the fire with misted eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE END OF THE TRAIL

It was May, called by the Crees the "Mating Moon" of the birds. To the south, in the land of the Ojibwas, it was the "Moon of Flowers." Long since, the black-tipped wings of the snowy geese had flashed overhead on the long flight to the arctic islands. Already the grey Canadas were nesting in the muskeg ponds back of Hungry House, and the little brothers of the air, duck and snipe and plover, guarding their eggs on lonely backwaters.

The grinding ice had plunged and churned past

the post to the bay. River willows and alder were reddening and the young grass thrusting green from the post clearing where huskies sprawled in the warm sun. But there was an air of unrest at the house of Angus McCain. Daily, a mother, anxious of face, talked nervously with the grave factor and his head-man, of the absent Peterboro which had, the August before, started for the unknown Yellow-Leg.

Ten days overdue, there was hardly a moment of the lengthening days when someone at Hungry House was not searching the river where it forked at the delta islands for the black speck of moving canoe, and the flash of dripping paddles.

"I'm worried, Angus. I don't want Antoine to wait another day," said Mrs. McCain, one morning. "They may have been smashed up in the rapids — lost their food. I wish you'd send him and Saul to-morrow."

"Yes, mother," answered the sober Angus, picking up his telescope and starting across the factor's plot, guarded by dog-stockade, on his way to the high shore.

In a half hour he returned.

"Nothing in sight?" demanded his wife.

"No," and McCain went to the trade-house to talk to his head-man. The two were getting to-

gether an outfit which would take the search through to the Yellow-Leg headwaters when a black head thrust through the trade-house door.

"Cano' comin' — at de islan'!" announced Saul.

"The boys!" cried Angus McCain and he hurried to his house to tell the worried mother of Brock; then joined Antoine and Saul on the high shore above the swollen river.

Where the river split into three channels at the delta islands, a black spot moved slowly upstream close to the main shore. Focusing his small telescope, for a space, Angus McCain watched the craft buck the current, then he handed it to Antoine.

"I can't make it out yet, but there seem to be more than two in that boat."

"Ah-hah! Three — four paddle, I t'ink," answered the half-breed.

"It's the Peterboro?"

"Ah-hah! Eet ees no bark cano'."

Mrs. McCain joined the little group of men, women and children on the cliff shore, watching the approaching boat.

"You're sure, Angus — there's no mistake? It's not Indians?"

"It's the boys for sure, mother," and the relieved trader patted the shoulder of the anxious mother.

"Four paddles, dere!" announced Antoine, handing the glass to his chief.

"There're no Indians wintering up the coast — who in thunder have they picked up?"

For an hour the canoe bucked the drive of the current, hugging the shore for the easier going there. They were less than a mile distant when someone shouted: "There are the dogs!"

On the beach, three huskies kept abreast of the canoe.

"There's Brock in the bow!" cried Angus McCain as the craft approached the post. "I'd know his shoulders, anywhere; and Gaspard's steering her!" Closer came the wanderers, and the little group of excited people on the high shore ran to the beach below to welcome those who had returned from the ruthless maw of the Yellow-Leg wilderness.

"Brock!" called his mother, waving her white apron, her eyes blinded with tears. "Brockie! Brockie!" yelled in chorus two young brothers and a sister, leaping like rabbits in their excitement and joy.

"Gaspard! Kekway, Gaspard!" shouted the half-breeds, as the bow and stern men stood grinning, waving their paddles at the shore.

Then, as he waved his arms at his hulking son in the bow of the approaching canoe, Angus McCain gasped in amazement. "Antoine, look!

Raised from the dead! Well — I'll be — Hello! Pierre! Pierre Lecroix!" shouted the astounded trader, running out into the water to meet the canoe.

Standing in water to his knees, Angus McCain took his son in his arms, then passed him on to the mother who waited.

"Pierre!" The hands of Frenchman and factor met in a long grip. "Man, I'm glad to see you! We had given you up!"

Then McCain saw the crippled leg.

Pierre Lecroix swung himself from canoe to beach, then standing surrounded by the excited group, said proudly, as he rested a hand on the shoulder of his son:

"Tru de long snows, dese boys here were hunted by 'Red' Macbeth, and twenty men. Dey want de Yellow-Leg country for demself. Did Gaspard and Brock run home? No, in March dey hunt Macbeth — clear to de coast."

The silent audience, Indian and white, listened breathlessly as the scarred Frenchman went on: "At de mout' of de Carcajou, dey find schooner and Macbeth's camp. In de night I see de sky red wid fire of burning ship and shack — and dey tak' me home."

Pierre Lecroix, choking with emotion, then finished:

"Dese boy here, Brock and Gaspard, do dese t'ings!"

With a cheer from the crowd, the returned voyageurs were led to the post clearing where the red emblem of the great company, blazoned with the white letters H. B. C. was hoisted. Then as Brock and Gaspard stood grinning at the honor about to be conferred, from the foot of the flag pole crashed a volley from a dozen rifles.

With an arm about the mother who smiled beside him, and a hand on the massive skull of the great grey and white husky nuzzling his sleeve, Brock said to Gaspard, "Do we hunt the Yellow-Leg next long snows, partner?"

Gaspard's black eyes snapped as he gave Brock his answer: "Do de bird come back in the spreeng?"

CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL.

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